MY YOUTH ROMANTIC COMEDY IS WRONG, AS I EXPECTED

Wataru Watari

Illustration Ponkan⑧

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Hachiman
Hikigaya
Komachi
Hikigaya

My Youth Romantic Comedy Is Wrong, As I Expected
Iroha
Isshiki

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Wataru Watari
Illustration Ponkan⑧

VOLUME
10

YEN ON
NEW YORK

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MY YOUTH ROMANTIC COMEDY IS WRONG, AS I EXPECTED
Vol. 10
WATARU WATARI
Illustration by Ponkan⑧

Translation by Jennifer Ward
Cover art by Ponkan⑧

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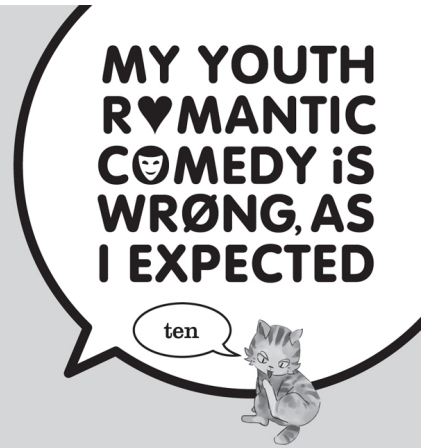
MY YOUTH ROMANTIC COMEDY IS WRONG, AS I EXPECTED



Cast of Characters

Hachiman Hikigaya..... The main character. High school second-year. Twisted personality.

Yukino Yukinoshita..... Captain of the Service Club. Perfectionist.

Yui Yuigahama..... Hachiman's classmate. Tends to worry about what other people think.

Saika Totsuka..... In tennis club. Very cute. A boy, though.

Saki Kawasaki..... Hachiman's classmate. Sort of a delinquent type.

Hayato Hayama..... Hachiman's classmate. Popular. In the soccer club.

Kakeru Tobe..... Hachiman's classmate. An excitable character and member of Hayama's clique.

Yumiko Miura..... Hachiman's classmate. Reigns over the girls in class as queen bee.

Hina Ebina..... Hachiman's classmate. Part of Miura's clique, but a slash fangirl.

Iroha Isshiki..... Manager of the soccer club. First-year student who was elected student council president.

Meguri Shiromeguri..... Former president of the student council. Third-year student.

Shizuka Hiratsuka..... Japanese teacher. Guidance counselor.

Haruno Yukinoshita..... Yukino's older sister. In university.

Komachi Hikigaya..... Hachiman's little sister. In her third year in middle school.

The First Notebook

…Possibly, that's not unique to anyone.

"Mine has been a life of much shame."

My gaze happened to land on that line.

The end of the year was approaching, and the family was in the middle of a full house clean. As I was organizing my collection of books, my hand unconsciously reached out for a certain one.

I think I picked up this particular book, among the many I have, because I felt a strangely intense connection to the title itself, its four characters in Japanese.

No Longer Human.

I seemed to recall having read this book around the beginning of middle school.

But coming up to the middle of "The Second Notebook," I'd slammed the book shut, and I hadn't been able to read it since. It had been a difficult read for me at the time, and it was also a little boring for a middle school kid. There was plenty of other fun stuff out there, and I hadn't been so starved for entertainment that I needed to bother trying to be all smart and read kind of a hard book.

That was why I'd closed this one.

Because I'd felt as if I—the person I really am, the person I've always kept secret and continued to hide—would be exposed. I had the feeling that even the reason I tried to read this particular book back in middle school was probably written in here.

But the reason I was reading it now was because I thought I'd gotten rid of it. I'd been so surprised, I just picked it up.

Thinking about it properly, though, there was no way I could get rid of this book.

They say that a bookshelf is an expression of its owner's personality.

Then I'm sure this is who I really am. That's why I could never

let go of it, just keeping it closed up, pretending I didn't see it. But despite that, I had picked it up one more time.

A sign or fate.

I'm not the type to believe in that stuff, but then being too eager to reject them feels like affirming them, so I don't like that, either.

I wiped the built-up dust off the bookshelf, then went straight over to the sofa to sink down into it—the rest of the book. Going beyond what I hadn't been able to keep reading back then.

I would have to look at it now.

1

In the end, **Komachi Hikigaya** looks for divine help.

As I was reading the book, the sun sank entirely below the horizon.

During big cleanups or tidy ups, I'm especially vulnerable to catching the "whoops, I'm reading a book now" disease.

That was close… If I'd just been reading a series, then I would have let momentum take me through the whole set, then declared, *The newest book isn't out yet?! Do your job, writer!*

I got up from the sofa and returned the book I'd just finished to the shelf.

Now my big clean was over. I hadn't tidied up anything, but still. I was done.

In life, you can't wipe away the stains of the past, so cleaning is both impossible and meaningless. Once your life is a mess, the cleanup will never end no matter how you try going about it.

Anyway, I'd finished sorting the bookshelf in my room, at least, so I withdrew to the living room in high spirits.

There were only a few days left in the year.

I remembered our parents had said they'd be finishing up their giant piles of work the following day and would be home late that night. That was why our mother had been getting the cleaning done bit by bit whenever she had a spare moment. The living room was already spick-and-span.

But there was someone boldly lying in that spotless living room and emitting a rather ominous aura.

It was my little sister, Komachi Hikigaya.

Her top half was sticking out from the *kotatsu*, while the family cat, Kamakura, was lying on Komachi's back and grooming himself with long slurps of his tongue.

"What's wrong with you…?" I mumbled, but there was no response. *It's just a corpse… Ohhh, poor Komachi, to die like this…*

But it was probably uncomfortable to have a cat on her back. He was just like some kind of lingering spirit, possessing Komachi and refusing to budge. Wait, a cat ghost *youkai*? I wish they'd make it clear if he's a cat or a spirit or a *youkai*, *meow*.

Getting into the *kotatsu* myself, I scooped up Kamakura and moved him onto my lap. Kamakura kneaded my lap two, three times to make himself comfortable, then flopped back down to go back to sleep. *Sorry for bothering you during your nap! Forgive me,* meow*!* ♪

Freed from the weight, Komachi lifted her head. "Oh, Bro…"

The twinkle in her eyes was gone; now, they were as dull as those of a dead fish. Awww, just like her big brother! We really are related! And if I resemble adorable little Komachi, I must be cute! Erk, but those rotten eyes are seriously uncute. If they're enough to undo Komachi's cuteness, then I must be downright horrifying.

But this was the first time I'd ever seen Komachi this bummed.

"Komachi, are you okay…?"

"Nope…not at all…," she whined, then once again buried her face in a cushion. And then, in broken fragments, she muttered like a delirious person, "I have to…do the big clean… Clean up garbage, garbage…clean up…Bro…"

"Calm down, Komachi. All the major cleaning is basically done. Besides, you can't get rid of your brother that easily. Be patient about it."

"Urrrk, gotta take out the trash, though, in Komachi terms…" She flicked me a dissatisfied look.

But I couldn't do anything about that. You can put me out on the sidewalk, but nobody would pick me up. I'm too much of a hassle. Just like Miss Hiratsuka. But this was not the time to be setting up such defensive perimeters. Right now, this was about Komachi.

I was pretty sure of what was responsible for Komachi's current state, or most of it anyway—entrance exams. I figured she was having a rough time studying, or a mock exam went awry, or something.

Komachi had been plugging away at her studies day and night since Christmas, but with New Year's looming before us, it seemed she had run out of gas.

Sobbing, sniffing, and moaning, Komachi whined, "I'm boned, I'm boned…"

And then she glanced over at me.

When I said nothing, Komachi once again buried her face in the cushion with a *fwump*. I could just barely hear her muffled voice. "*Sob…wahhh…* I'm so tired…"

And then she glanced over at me.

What a pain in the butt she is…

But, well, I'm a veteran with fifteen or so years of big brother experience under my belt. I've made sure to learn what advice to offer at times like these. "Well, you know what they say about all work and no play. It's just about New Year's, so why don't you go out a bit for a shrine visit, to take your mind off things?"

"Yeah!" Komachi answered instantly, leaping up. Looked like I'd answered correctly. Of course I had, being a professional big brother. After I graduate, I should get a job where I can make full use of this big brother skill—in fact, I'd even say the country should set up a big brother profession. What is a professional big brother? Is it his role to be financially supported by his little sister? It's an unparalleled career—although I don't think that's the right word. *Unemployed*, that's it.

But still, a professional socially conscious big brother does not just spoil his little sister. I made sure to offer advice, too. "That's fine, but study hard until then."

"I know, I know. It's easier to work when I've got something to look forward to, you know?" Komachi said, but she wasn't listening at all. She got up and started reaching out for the oranges.

Well, as long as she's motivated…

"Is there a shrine you want to go to?" I asked. "Like a place you think would be worth praying at?"

"Hmm…" Komachi started to think.

Maybe which shrine you visit on New Year's is pretty important to a student taking entrance exams. I mean, there is that saying about looking to the gods when you're in trouble.

If you're in it deep, then the gods are all you can rely on. Can't rely on people, after all. And given how unreliable people are, you could even say that you should rely on the gods on just about a daily basis. If it's pinch after pinch and another hopeless pinch. At times like that, you want something Ultra-ish, you know?

"Around here there's, like, that one place. Dad said he stayed up all night waiting there—Kameido Tenjin," I suggested. It's not that far—just one stop away on the Sobu Line from our house. Of

course, there's a god of academics enshrined there, so you could expect it to be real crowded around this time of year. Imagining the crowds made me wrinkle my nose. I mean, I just don't like crowds.

☆

Then Komachi also got that same *eugh* look on her face. "Staying up all night… Dad can be kinda creepy, huh…?"

He's a good Dad—forgive him… If Mom hadn't stopped him, he would've gone to Dazaifu… I get the feeling Mom was staying up all night, too.

"Well, never mind Dad. There's also Yushima Tenjin…" Since this was also a Tenjin shrine, it was very popular during the entrance exam season. In other words, you could anticipate it being very crowded at this time and (the rest has been omitted).

As I was considering candidates, Komachi groaned. "Hmm, those famous spots are fine, but…I think I'd get more blessings from a place close to the high school!"

"You think? So then…Sengen Shrine?"

"Ohhh, the one that's always having festivals."

"Uh, they're not always having them." Just what kind of shrine would always have a festival going on? That would be pretty worthless. Is it like that shop in front of Akihabara Station that's been having a closing sale its whole life? Do we really have to celebrate every day?

But Komachi wasn't very familiar with Inage Sengen Shrine, so it wasn't really a surprise that all it was in her mind was festivals. Big tourist spots are one thing, but you only go to neighborhood shrines during New Year's and festivals.

Sengen Shrine, though, huh…? I wasn't thrilled with the idea of going there, since I got the feeling a lot of people I knew would be there. Still, it might be better than the local shrine. Wait, isn't it just that I don't want to go anywhere?

Komachi was looking at me with concern—guess she could see my hesitation on my face.

"What's wrong?" I asked her, and she pulled her shoulders back while still seated, gathering herself.

"Hey, listen, Bro. It's totally okay if you don't come along. Komachi can just go with Mom anyway."

Hmm, so we're just leaving Dad out, huh? Sounds about right for him.

Well, I could kind of get why Komachi was trying to be

considerate about this. She had to have her own worries about her big brother. Well, Big Bro also has his own worries about himself, you know? But I still hadn't figured out the right way to conduct myself.

So I was fairly grateful for winter vacation, this period of just under two weeks. Of course, once school started, I'd have to face everything again, though.

But for now, it was a brief respite. When I get a break to rest, I take full advantage. Forcing your brain to work on vacation days is unbecoming for one who aspires to be a househusband. Conclusions should always be put off, and proposals taken home for further consideration. This is the rule of the corporate slave! Wait, am I a corporate slave or a househusband…?

In order to take full advantage of my vacation and this opportunity for procrastination, I decided to quickly dodge the topic. "You don't have to worry about me so much."

"Ohhh, Komachi would love that to be true, you know." She sighed dramatically.

Sorry you got stuck with me for a brother. "Well, if you're not going, Komachi, then I'll just go alone, like I do every year. Less on my shoulders that way. It's easier."

"There you go, saying stuff like that again…"

"As the old saying goes, the year's plans are to be made on New Year's Day. So if you have a bad experience during your New Year's shrine visit, then the rest of your year will suck, too, my dear Komachi. And don't you think it's foolish to ring in the glorious new year by making yourself miserable in a giant crowd?"

Komachi looked quite fed up by my eloquent lecture. But though she seemed completely unamused at first, she gradually started *hmm*ing with appreciation until she raised her chin to give me a serious look. "I see. The year's plans on New Year's… Komachi's going with you after all." Just a minute ago, she'd been eyeing me with disgust, but now she was all serious. Total 180.

That was just a little bit creepy, so I asked, "O-okay… What's this all of a sudden?"

Komachi beamed at me brightly. "'Cause if Komachi spends New Year's Day with you, that means we'll be together all next year, too, right? And that was worth a lot of Komachi points."

"O-okay. Yeah, that's right…"

The directness of her remark kind of shorted out my brain for a

sec.

…

…Oh man, my little sister is so cute! Especially if you ignore her stock phrase there at the end!

"K-Komachi…" I was choked with tears of emotion in spite of myself.

Komachi puffed up her blushing cheeks, jerking her face away, then gave me a sidelong glance. "D-don't get the wrong idea! I just meant going to the same high school as you, so this is about praying to pass my exams! And this whole bit has been worth so many Komachi points!"

Whoa, that's a cheap *tsundere* act… I figure about the only thing cheaper is the monsters in the underwater levels of Mario games. Why are they called Cheep Cheeps when they're fish anyway?

Just now, she was trying a little too hard to be truly cute, but if I thought of it as hiding her shyness from what she'd said before, maybe I could still give it a pass.

"Then let's go together," I said.

"Yeah. Okay, then maybe Komachi should go back to the bedroom for another spurt," she said and crawled out of the *kotatsu* to get up.

"Yeah, see you later." I grabbed Kamakura's front paws as he lay on my lap and waved at her with them, making Komachi smile.

"Yep, yep, Komachi's gonna do her best!" she said and scooped up her cell phone. Humming, she tapped away at it, then headed to her room.

Only Kamakura and I remained in the living room. Kamakura huffed and shook his paws from my grasp, then stood up grumpily and stretched out long. Then he wriggled himself under the *kotatsu* and holed himself up inside.

I copied him, squirming into the *kotatsu* up to my shoulders to become a kotatsnail.

There wasn't much of the year left.

Like every year before it, this one was coming quietly to a close.

X X X

The new year began peacefully.

Happy New Year—it always feels kinda stupid saying it back and forth among your family. It's an empty phrase.

But you've gotta do what you've gotta do for that red envelope full of cash from your relatives to ring in the new year. Yes, the special lessons for corporate slavery begin in early childhood. You'll close your eyes to a few unreasonable, unfair demands; bow when you don't want to bow; and put on a thin, obsequious smile all for the sake of getting cash. That's what being a corporate slave is all about!

While privately entertaining such trivial thoughts, I graciously received another year's red envelope from my parents. In the distant past, it had disappeared into the mysterious "bank of Mom" that should have saved up quite a bit by now. She'll probably give it back when I move out. I think. Surely. I'm even praying that you can't take the *M* off *mother*.

Now that I'd safely acquired that year's funds, I got into the *kotatsu*, lay down, and did nothing.

And then, using a floor chair as a pillow, I clicked away on my phone.

With the arrival of this new year also came the vibrating of my cell phone for once.

The "New Year's e-mails."

First thing in the new year, I got one stupidly long and formal e-mail, one e-mail that was simple but so cute it was dumb, and one e-mail from an unknown sender that sounded like a prophetic text… Well, that was about it. I thought maybe one more might come, perhaps from some flighty individual, but it seemed not. It wasn't like I was really expecting it. I rushed off some sloppy and careless responses to the M-2ish e-mail and the aggressively long e-mail.

But for the last one, the newest work in the Simple series, *The Cute E-mail*, I didn't know how to reply. Getting too serious about it and replying with a long e-mail would be creepy, but it would also be gross to send back a sparkly monstrosity full of images and emotes. So then, a standard text—but that would also come across as curt and cold.

It'd be easier for me if there was some kind of template and a fixed character limit, like with New Year's postcards… They're so convenient because you can tell if it's out of blatant social obligation or not. All of them just need a big illustration or photo

printed on them, while in the margins you write *Let's go hang out again!* or *Let's go drinking again*, and it's done. Japanese culture really is great. But there's an abnormally high overuse of *Let's go drinking again!* among university students when they don't know what else to put. I think if you drink that much all year round, you're gonna become an alcoholic. But the fact that they don't probably means they're just saying that out of politeness, and they won't actually go drinking with you…

With such thoughts on my mind, I wrote, then erased, wrote, then erased my reply, erasing and writing and erasing and writing *KESHITEEEE! RIRAITO SHITEEE!* over and over.

I wanted to reply with something long, but too long would be creepy, but if I made it too short, would I just be curt? With these worries on my mind, I decided to reply with almost exactly the same number of characters as the message I had gotten. In psychological terms, this is what they call mirroring. By doing the same thing as the other person, you make them feel more positively toward you!

"Bro, let's get going," Komachi called to me as I was typing.

Checking the clock, I saw it was almost nine in the morning. Our parents were already heading for Kameido Tenjin. It was about time for us to go out, too.

"Yeah…let's go."

Checking that the e-mail had sent properly, I crawled out of the *kotatsu* and got up.

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We trundled along in the crowded train for a few stations. Joining the waves of people spat out from the ticket gates, we walked down the gentle slope to eventually arrive at the first torii of Sengen Shrine.

They say that this big torii facing the National Highway 14 once stood in the ocean. That was tweeted by the Chiiba-kun official account, so you know it's true. A long, long time ago, it must have been a magnificent spectacle, like the World Heritage site Itsukushima Shrine. In other words, there was once a chance for Chiba to have possibly become a World Heritage site. In my heart, it already is.

"What a turnout, though, huh…?" *I was right to make it a World Heritage site… It's really popular…*

"This is the biggest shrine around here, right?" Komachi said. "Then of course everyone'll come here!"

I see—that does make sense… Suddenly it hit me. If everyone was coming here, then if you thought about it, wouldn't that mean others from my high school were also likely to show up…?

Oh crap, I went to the neighborhood shrine every year before, so I completely forgot…, I was thinking when Komachi started looking around beside me.

"Oh, there they are." Then she pushed her way through the sea of people, trotting ahead.

"H-hey, Komachi. Where are you going?" *You've got your entrance exams coming up, so I figure Big Bro has to hold your hand so that you don't fall or slip or get lost; I mean, I could even carry you bridal-style! Bro will do it!* I thought, reaching out my hand, when I was met with very familiar faces.

"Happy New Year, guys!" With a gleeful cry, Komachi rushed up to them like she was going to glomp them.

The girl ahead of her shot up a hand, and her light-brown bun bobbed on her head. "Yahallo in the new year!"

"What's with that greeting…? Happy that," I replied, feeling aghast.

Yuigahama had a warp-knit sweater and a beige coat with a long scarf wrapped around her neck, and her raised hand was snugly tucked into mittens.

Right beside her was a girl in a white coat, a checked miniskirt, and black tights. That was Yukino Yukinoshita.

"…Happy New Year," Yukinoshita said, burying her face in the softness of her scarf. Well, formal New Year's greetings are really awkward to say.

I fiddled with the tassel ends of my scarf, too. "Yeah… Well, uh. Same to you."

"Then let's get going," Komachi said. She moved forward into the crowds, and we followed after her.

While we walked, I poke-poked at Komachi's back. "Komachi-chan, can Big Bro ask you something?"

"What?"

Sneaking up beside her, I lowered my voice. "Why are they here?"

“Komachi planned to meet them here. ☆”

“Uh, you what…?” I said, a little aggrieved.

Komachi pouted. “They’re Komachi’s friends, so what’s the problem?”

“Yeah, but… If you’re gonna invite someone…like, you know?” I said with a thoughtful *hmm* as I scratched my cheek.

Normally, if you’re going to invite someone out at a time like this, wouldn’t you invite friends from your own school? Well, I never had any friends in middle school, so I don’t really know what’s normal, though. Maybe that was because of *youkai*? Maybe that’s what they call a *Yo-kai Botch*—I mean, my social life has been pretty thoroughly botched.

But what about Komachi's social life if she's compromising for her brother's sake on New Year's? When I gave her a look of concern, she seemed to guess what I wanted to say and cleared her throat with a deliberate-sounding *ahem*.

"Well, around this time, it's only polite to not invite friends from school, you know…," she murmured softly.

Ohhh. Now I got it. The reason her friends from her class weren't an option here was because of pre-exam anxieties.

Entrance exams create sharp contrasts.

Two friends might take the exams for the same school, and one fails while the other gets in. It's a common enough story. Hearing about a couple where both took the exams for the same school and one failed is absolutely delicious, and if on top of that, it leads to them growing distant and breaking up, then you'll be eating like Gohan ga Susumu-kun.

When you're around middle school age, that will put a definitive crack in your friendship. Especially if you're taking the exams for an exclusive university-oriented school, someone will be crowded out. And that one who was crowded out will come in full force to end that relationship. I'd do that.

You do it out of embarrassment, resentment, and jealousy. Sometimes you'll bare those negative feelings, but sometimes people will put on a smile and shove down their feelings at first, only to later end the relationship.

Even knowing your relationship is going to end either way, it's rather complicated. If you want to graduate with a smile, then you should probably stay away from your friends during the entrance exam period. Times like these, it's superconvenient to not have friends! Hachiman thinks probably the first thing cram schools should be teaching you is how to destroy your friendships!

I'm sure that's why Komachi felt more at ease at a time like this with friends who were a bit older. They could approach each other without reserve.

Right that very moment, Komachi was saying something to Yukinoshita and Yuigahama. The pair responded with smiles, and they all chatted animatedly as they walked. After being hounded by her studies all through winter vacation, maybe this was a good de-stressing time for Komachi.

Among the surging crowd, Yuigahama's neck craned as she glanced all around. It looked like she was being drawn to the food stands that lined the sides of the road to the shrine.

"It's like a festival!" she said.

Komachi's eyes were sparkling, too. "It is! Oh, how about something to eat?"

"I like that idea! Then I'll have…a candied apple maybe."

As the two of them talked, they started wandering off the shrine way. Beside them, Yukinoshita tugged on Yuigahama's scarf to stop her. "After we finish praying at the shrine," she said.

"Okaaay…" The other two reluctantly returned to the crowds.

What a sisterly exchange… There's no room for Big Brother…

Maybe it was Yukinoshita's sensible personality, or Yuigahama's easygoing ability to accommodate other people, or maybe this feat was accomplished by the elemental power of the greatest and most famed little sister in the world, Komachi Hikigaya. Whatever reason it was, these girls were pretty compatible despite their differing ages.

Yuigahama took the lead with the group; Komachi followed after, laughing boisterously; and Yukinoshita followed the other two calmly, as if watching over them.

Observing the three from the very back, I walked along.

Then suddenly, something about the word that had just come to my mind, *sisterly*, stuck on me.

…Crap.

Thinking incredibly stupid thoughts first thing in the new year brought up the corners of my mouth a bit, and my cheeks couldn't help but relax in a smile. I tugged up my scarf to hide it.

While I was at it, I also looked away from the front over to the waves of people.

Urgh, can't we do anything about these absolutely awful crowds? I am an inch away from vomiting. I wanna go home right now…

But the crowds did ease a little once we were up the stone steps and into the shrine grounds—probably because there were no food stalls there. Since the shrine was right in front of us, everyone was going straight ahead to worship without getting distracted by the sights. We joined the flow of people as well and came up before the shrine.

"What is everyone gonna wish for?" asked Yuigahama.

"You don't do that sort of thing at New Year's," I said. "This

isn't Tanabata."

"Indeed," Yukinoshita agreed. "Making a wish in the hopes of receiving something is too utilitarian for this."

"Woooow, you two are boring…," Komachi said, sounding deeply put off, and Yuigahama seemed to agree.

"Yeah! Praying basically means asking, so it's better to pray for something!"

Whoa, I didn't get a single thing about that logic.

Yukinoshita also seemed to struggle to understand, putting her hand to her temple as she breathed a sigh. "Agh… Well, I suppose it's fine. Though I feel that if anything, the nuance for this practice favors making a vow."

When Yukinoshita cracked a little smile, Yuigahama responded with a big nod and stuck herself to Yukinoshita's arm. Together, they tossed coins into the slatted offertory box and swung the big rope to ring the bell. Then they bowed twice and clapped twice, closing their eyes quietly with their hands together.

An oath before a god has a somehow solemn atmosphere to it.

I did the same as the girls, and after going through with the etiquette, I put my hands together as well.

A wish…or something I should swear, huh…?

My eyes slid sideways over at Yukinoshita and Yuigahama.

Yukinoshita's eyelids were softly closed as she expelled a faint breath. Yuigahama had a crease between her eyebrows as she moaned, "Mmmgh." I don't know what they wished for or what they swore.

I closed my eyes like them. I had nothing like a wish, but I wouldn't ask for anything I could manage with my own efforts.

For now, I would wish for Komachi to pass her exams…since this was the one thing I couldn't figure out a way to do for her.

X X X

Once we were done praying, I was finally freed from the river of people.

As I scanned the broad shrine grounds, there were shrine maidens all over the place. It was *miko miko* nurse here. Just kidding, there were no nurses.

On the wide grounds, Yuigahama found something and called

out, “Oh, fortunes!”

“…Then let’s go draw some,” I said.

We got in line to do just that. The sticks inside the wooden hexagonal cylinder rattled as I shook it. I told the number on the stick that came out to the shrine maiden, and when she gave me a fortune, I opened it up.

“Minor luck…”

Very meh… But you can’t complain if you get nothing much when you just paid a hundred yen for it. I skimmed over the headings, but all of them were meh. For example, under health it said, *Be wary of ill health before symptoms appear*. See? Just meh.

You couldn’t say it was a fully bad fortune to get, so I was waffling about whether to tie it up on the tree or not when Yukinoshita, who was standing to my side, waved her own fortune at me.

“…Luck,” she said with a smug smile on her face. Hey, is luck better than minor luck? No matter how you look at it, it’s too normal, and it really doesn’t seem like it’d be much, though? But if Yukinoshita was that happy about it, well, luck had to be the better fortune. Though I’m sure this depends on the shrine.

She’s just as competitive as always, huh…? I was thinking when Yuigahama came to show off her fortune with a proud chuckle.

“I got major luck!”

“…I see. Good for you,” Yukinoshita said, but her eyes were blazing fire.

Is she okay…? She’s not gonna keep drawing fortunes until she gets major luck, is she…?

As I was watching in suspense, Komachi trudged out from Yukinoshita’s shadow with a dark expression. “Komachi got bad luck…”

Getting a bad luck fortune when you’ve got entrance exams… Yuigahama’s cheerful smile faded, and the fire of Yukinoshita’s antagonistic spirit was quenched. *This atmosphere is getting kinda heavy, guys…*

Yukinoshita cleared her throat to fill the silence and kindly patted Komachi’s shoulder. “It’s all right. Your family may invite ill omens, but that means nothing.”

“That’s a pretty awful kind of encouragement…,” I said. “Well, but, Komachi, fortunes aren’t something you need to worry about. You’ll forget whatever you pulled within a week.”

“Is your encouragement supposed to be better…?”

“I kinda feel less glad about getting major luck now…”

Yukinoshita and Yuigahama both looked at the fortunes in their hands with complicated expressions.

That’s odd… I was really trying my best to encourage my sister, thinking of what was best for her, but that just brought in more misery.

Then, suddenly, Yuigahama clapped her hands as if she’d just come up with an idea. “Oh, I know. Here, let’s trade,” she said and offered the fortune she’d just drawn to Komachi.

“Huh? You don’t mind?”

“It’s fine!” Yuigahama replied with a smile, but Komachi still waffled about accepting it, looking over at me for help.

“Well, it’ll be lucky. Just take it,” I told her. This was a major luck fortune drawn by Yuigahama, which meant it had to be lucky. I mean, it was absolutely baffling that she’d gotten into our school. I bet you can twist fate a bit, and hey, maybe you can ignore the laws of physics, too.

“Thank you so much… Komachi’s gonna work real hard!”

“Yeah. I’d like it if you could be at our school, too, Komachi-chan,” Yuigahama said, handing her fortune to Komachi, and in exchange, she took the bad luck fortune Komachi had drawn.

Then Yukinoshita touched her hand to her chin and considered. “Yuigahama, could you lend that to me?”

“Huh? Sure, but…”

Accepting it from Yuigahama, Yukinoshita tied the two together into one. “Now taking the average, the both of you should get about minor luck.”

“How does that math work?” I said. Does that mean that (bad luck + luck) ÷ 2 = 2 × minor luck? In terms of the math, it seems scientific, but the idea feels kinda artsy. Maybe it’s that dual-discipline thing that’s in right now.

“Now we all match,” Yuigahama said gladly.

Yukinoshita smiled in satisfaction as well. “Yes…now it’s an even draw.”

“That’s what you were after?!”

“This method of resolution feels like some nineties participation trophy–style education gone wrong…” This is as bad as the whole class at the school arts festival playing the lead role of Momotaro, all holding hands as they cut through the finish-line tape together.

“I’m joking,” Yukinoshita said with a smile.

Gleefully tucking the fortune she’d gotten into her wallet, Komachi jerked her head up. “We’re done praying and drawing fortunes, so what should we do now?”

“Let’s go look at the food stands!” Yuigahama proposed—she’d been fully intending to do that since she’d been on the way to the shrine—and Yukinoshita nodded in agreement.

We’d be going back along the same shrine road anyway. I wasn’t opposed. Rather, it seemed I had no right to comment in the first place, and the three girls had already started walking.

When we returned the way we’d come, we reached a corner with a line of stalls. Not only did they have standards like *okonomiyaki* and *takoyaki*—there were also stalls selling *amazake*. It had to be a seasonal thing.

Among all the food-type stalls, there was also a sharpshooting booth. You see those a lot at summer festivals, but when I looked over, thinking, *They even have those in winter?* I caught the sound of someone muttering beside me.

“Why is there sharpshooting at the shrine on New Year’s…?” Yukinoshita was eyeing the booth, probably thinking, *How strange…*

“Yeah, sure, it’s weird, but I’m sure kids come, too. It’s normal to have things if they figure they can make a profit, right?”

“It’s baffling… Why would one be in a place like this…?” But Yukinoshita wasn’t listening to me, and she still continued to stare at the sharpshooting booth. And there was something that looked like Ginnie the Grue.

Ohhh, that’s why she’s staring… “…You wanna do sharpshooting?”

“No, not really,” Yukinoshita said, but she was fidgeting.

She definitely wants to…

Still continuing to mutter to herself, Yukinoshita was looking over at the thing that looked like Grue-bear. Guess she wasn’t going to move from the spot unless she got it. *What do I do here? I’m not really confident in my skills, but maybe I’ll give it a shot and see if I can get it…*

As I was calculating the state of my wallet, Yuigahama called out quietly, “Ah!” then gave my sleeve a tug.

“What?”

“Mm,” she said, then further gestured at me to make me bend over a little. Following her direction, I lowered my head slightly,

and Yuigahama gently tilted her face toward my ear as if she were going to tell me a secret.

Upon assuming this position, I'd been fully aware that there was about to be some proximity. There was nothing to get startled about now, and nothing to bother getting hyperaware about.

But her citrus perfume was different from usual, and it tickled my nose, and when her cheeks, slightly ruddy under the winter wind, leaned right up in front of me, I didn't know which way to turn my face.

After expelling a shallow, quiet breath, I looked over at Yuigahama to prompt her to talk, and she let out the very tiniest sigh. Then she began to murmur into my ear. "Hey, what are you gonna do about going to get Yukinon a present?"

"Oh yeah…"

Now that she mentioned it, I considered.

It was almost Yukinoshita's birthday. And on Christmas not long ago, I'd promised to go buy a present for her.

Oh, it's not like I'd forgotten that promise—in fact, I'd been thinking about what I should do. I'd been thinking about the whole 5W1H of it: who, what, where, when, why, and how—and not just that but how I should even broach the subject. It's hard to be the one to invite someone else, you know. I really don't like deciding on dates and stuff. I'm sure she wouldn't like it if I just made a decision, but then asking *When's good?* is like throwing it all on the other person, and that feels awkward. What the heck? Now it feels like I'll never decide my whole life.

But anyway, I was grateful she was the one to bring it up. If I put that off too much, my train of thought would start spiraling until I wouldn't want to go anymore, and then I'd just be like, *Hachichika is going home!* So I decided to make the decision immediately.

"…Do you have time tomorrow?"

"Y-yeah. I do." Yuigahama was smushing her bun, maybe a little taken aback.

"Okay, then tomorrow…"

"Yeah…," Yuigahama replied, then fell silent. I couldn't really find anything to say, either.

Then Komachi came over and tugged at my sleeve. "Bro, Yukino isn't moving from her spot over there…"

Yuigahama's face jerked up. "Oh, why don't you come, too,

Komachi-chan?"

"Huh? For what?"

"Um, well, I was thinking about going shopping tomorrow together with Hikki for Yukinon's birthday present…"

"Oh, that's a good idea!" Komachi said, but then she seemed to have a sudden realization. And then smiled a very deliberate smile. "…But on second thought, you know, Komachi's got to study."

"O-of course… Mgnh," Yuigahama moaned. She'd only just given Komachi her fortune a moment ago, so she also remembered Komachi was studying for exams. But then after some more groaning, she lifted her head up and took Komachi's hand. "B-but, you know, what about a study break? And plus, I'm sure Yukinon would be glad to get something from you, Komachi-chan! I—I also kinda want to get some help from you, too…"

"Huh? O-oh, sure… Hmm?" Even as Komachi replied, she glanced over at me with doubt in her eyes.

"Since she's inviting you, why not?" I said.

Komachi tilted her head. "Hmm… Why are they moving backward…? But they went together in summer…," she muttered quietly.

Uh, look, there's a lot going on, okay? Like, I just can't quite figure out how much distance to place between us and stuff…

"Well, if you say so…," Komachi replied, sounding a bit hesitant.

Yuigahama nodded gladly and pulled out her cell phone. "Then it's decided! I'll text you later, okay?" Then the cell phone in her hand buzzed. "Oh, sorry a sec," Yuigahama said, going a little ways away from us to answer her phone. The call seemed to be from someone she was close with. But it would be crass to ask who—well, more like, *Just who do you think you are?* So I couldn't ask.

We couldn't move on until Yuigahama was done with her call. So there was nothing for it but to wait. Regardless, since Yukinoshita was trapped in front of the sharpshooting booth, we couldn't go anywhere anyway.

With that thought, I looked over to the sharpshooting stall to see Yukinoshita trudging back to us with slumped shoulders.

"What, you're done?" I said to her.

A sad smile flickered across her face. "Yes. Never mind that trash…"

"Huh?" Wondering just what had happened, I peeked over to

the sharpshooting stall. And there, I found the stuffed animal Yukinoshita had been eyeing the whole time was not Ginnie the Grue but Jenny the Grue. Ahhh, you get that sometimes, at these sorts of festival-y places. Like it's not Nacchan but Occhan orange juice, or Kajidas instead of Adidas or something.

Komachi, who had also been taking a look at the stalls, nodded with understanding and said, "Ohhh, it's one of those knockoffs, huh? It does kinda look like a cheap Hatchimal…"

Hearing that, Yukinoshita put her hand to her jaw and tilted her head. "Hatchimal? I feel like I've heard that name before. I think his surname was Hi…Hiki…"

"Hey? You don't mean me, do you? You can't even get my *family* name right?" I said.

Yukinoshita swept the hair off her shoulders as if she were quite offended. "How rude. I do remember it."

"You're the one being rude here, though…"

"More importantly, where's Yuigahama?"

So the discussion's over on my name, huh…?

"On the phone over there." I indicated with a jab of my chin, and over that way, Yuigahama was talking on the phone as she looked around.

"Uh-huh, yeah, like the stone steps? We just came down. We're already there."

"Ah, Yui, there you are."

Walking over to us with her phone in hand was Yumiko Miura. Even in these crowds, the fur at her collar was luxurious and rich, and her bare legs beneath her miniskirt would always draw attention.

Following behind her was Ebina, too. "Happy New Year, Yui. And same to you, too, guys." Unlike Miura just now, Ebina addressed us, too. She's a good person.

"Happy New Year."

"Wow, I haven't seen you in a long time! Happy New Year."

"I haven't seen you since summer, huh, Komachi-chan?"

As Ebina was conversing with Komachi and the others, I responded with a little nod and a "Hey" as I looked over at the group of girls chatting.

"Miura's crowd, huh…?" I muttered, realizing who it had been on that phone call just now. Yuigahama must have heard, as she turned back to me and nodded.

And then behind them, there were some more familiar faces.

The blond-haired, excitable Tobe, the bovine and indecisive Yamato, and the virgin opportunist Ooka. They were the new *Three for the Kill!* trio. But Tobe's hair is less blond and more brown, huh…? Though I really don't give a damn, so I've never paid it much attention.

The three of them were a little ways away from us.

Paper cups in hand, they were being loud and boisterous. It looked like they were drinking *amazake*. Tobe tossed his paper cup back in one go, then called out, "*Ahhhh*."

"The sake really gets to you, man! First drink of the year, whoo! Seriously, guys, have some more."

"Totally," Ooka replied, then drank down the contents of his paper cup and breathed a sigh of satisfaction. It's just *amazake*, guys. It's not like it's really alcoholic.

"Dude, I'm drinking so much, Bro. I feel so warm now. Damn, it's cold out, huh? Running the school marathon in this is like, whoa, man."

"Totally."

"Totally, man."

Yeah, totally, man…

I was mentally nodding in response to Yamato's and Ooka's remarks. Because of the way the calendar happened to work out that year, the school marathon, which was usually in February, had been shifted to the end of January. Soon, we'd have to be running right by the ocean while it was getting colder and colder by the day.

Thanks for starting my new year with a memory of that…, I thought, shooting a resentful glance over at the three stooges.

Then I suddenly realized.

Tobe and his stooges, Miura and Ebina—it was the usual faces.

But the one who was normally in the center of this roster was absent.

"Just them, huh…?" I said.

Yuigahama heard me and slid one step back to line up beside me. "They said they invited Hayato, too, but he couldn't come."

"Figures," Yukinoshita replied with a nod.

That remark was unexpected.

Miura, Ebina, Yuigahama, and I all turned toward Yukinoshita.

"Huh? Do you know something?" Yuigahama asked. She must

have been curious about the way Yukinoshita so easily accepted the news.

"His family has always been like that."

"Oh, really?" Yuigahama nodded like this made sense to her.

Well, Yukinoshita had originally been acquainted with Hayama—or to be more precise, they had been childhood friends, so it wasn't strange for her to know what was going on with his family.

"Huh…," I replied noncommittally. But I was now reminded of how I still didn't know much about Yukinoshita or Hayama. Not like I know Yuigahama all that deeply, either.

Aside from Yuigahama and myself, there was one other person who responded.

"…Hmm. Uh-huh," Miura huffed quietly, then looked away from Yukinoshita. Then she went a few steps away, spun her hair around her finger, and sighed like she was bored. "I'm hungry." With that, she trudged away without looking back at the others.

"Ah, Yumiko!" Yuigahama called out, and Miura stopped, shifting her body in their direction. She didn't say anything, though, and her face was still turned away.

A little smile crossed Ebina's face, and she started walking. "Then maybe I'll go get some food, too."

Tobe's keen ears picked up on that, and he sidled up to Miura and Ebina. "Oh yeah? You're going out to eat? Then that'll be my first meal of the new year!"

Oh, some guys are like that, huh? They celebrate every first in the new year. It's so obnoxious…

"Ah, um…" Looking back and forth between Miura's crowd and us, Yuigahama seemed to be struggling to decide.

"You're not going with them?" I asked her.

"Um…wh-what are you guys doing?" Yuigahama laughed awkwardly.

Yukinoshita gave her a hard look, then smiled just a little. "I'm about to head home. I'm not fond of the crowds," she said.

Yuigahama's expression turned complicated. "Huh? But…"

Yukinoshita seemed to sense her worry, laying a gentle touch on Yuigahama's shoulder. "We can see each other again soon."

"Yeah…," Yuigahama replied quietly, though that didn't really seem to convince her.

Well, none of us really wanted to start off the new year watching Miura and Yukinoshita going at it.

There was no doubting that Yuigahama's desire to get closer was an expression of her deep affection.

But it's the way of the world that a friend of a friend is not necessarily your friend, and it's not always best for everyone to be in the same space, spending time together.

Yukinoshita isn't very expressive, but I can tell when she's being considerate. Her ideals for proper behavior aren't so different from mine. So it was already settled what I would do now.

"Then I'm gonna get going home, too," I said.

Yuigahama looked up with some surprise. Not that it was anything to be surprised about.

"I just came to visit the shrine anyway. I've got to take Komachi home and make her study."

"Oh, yeah…uh-huh." Yuigahama nodded.

Beside me, Komachi tug-tugged at my sleeve. "Bro, don't worry about Komachi—just go!"

I'd triggered some kind of flag—I don't know if it was a death flag or a survival flag, but I was going to knock it down. Whatever it was, me joining in with that group was not an option.

"Then see you."

"See you at school."

After Yukinoshita and I had said that, Komachi had no choice but to bob her head, too. "…Yeah, see you."

Yuigahama gave us a little wave in front of her chest, and we headed out. Yuigahama was probably going to follow after Miura and her friends, now.

Yuigahama's friendships in the Service Club were not the only ones she had.

I don't know if she believes in having best friends, and I don't know who decides that, either. But I'm sure there have to be days when she worries about it.

I hope the care she shows there will not turn into something that exhausts her.

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Returning back along the shrine road we'd come down, we passed through the big torii and came out along the National Highway.

A cold wind blew along the wide road. I found myself shivering,

and me and Komachi both drew the collars of our coats closer. Yukinoshita, on the other hand, didn't seem particularly bothered by the cold. She just quietly adjusted the scarf around her neck.

Komachi tug-tugged at Yukinoshita's sleeve. "Yukino, let's stick together until we're close to your place!"

Yukinoshita hesitated just a little, but then a slight smile came to her face as she replied, "…Sure." Well, we were going back in the same direction anyway. There was no need to deliberately go our separate ways.

The road from here to the station was a commercial district, and it seemed they were expecting a New Year's rush, as there were little stalls out under the eaves here, too. It was just as bustling as the shrine area.

Komachi and Yukinoshita chatted over various things related to entrance exams and about what had happened during winter vacation.

Walking slowly along the gentle slope, when we approached the ticket gate at the station, Komachi suddenly stopped.

"Ah! O-oh no! Silly Komachi just forgot to buy a luck charm! I can't believe it! And I also totally forgot to write my wish on an *ema* board, so I'm gonna run back! Yukino-san, this is where I leave you guys!"

"Oh, then maybe I'll buy a lucky charm, too," I said.

Komachi gave me a look, unimpressed. "What are you talking about, Bro? You big dumb junk brother! Dim bulb! Hachiman! Listen, both of you just go back without me!"

"O-okay… Wait, hold on a second. Hachiman isn't an insult," I shot back at her, but Komachi never heard, as she'd already run off.

Uhhh, it's a little awkward if you disappear that suddenly… I'm kinda stuck here… Thanks to Komachi's antics, I was somewhat at a loss, but there's no resisting the little sistering. Oh nooo, I've been little sistered.

I turned back to Yukinoshita, wondering just what to do here, and saw her shoulders were trembling, her face turned away.

"What…?" I asked.

Yukinoshita expelled a *phew* and evened her breathing. Then she said quietly, under her breath, "Dumb brother, dim bulb, Hachiman…"

I suspect Miss Yukinoshita's insult vocabulary dictionary has gotten a long-awaited update… I gave her a dull look in rebuke, and

Yukinoshita cleared her throat to avoid it.

"Oh, no, I just thought, you really are close," she said with a gentle smile, then immediately spun around to face forward, passing through the ticket gates. I followed after her, heading up the stairs to the train platform.

As always, there were a lot of people on the platform. We must have just hit the exact peak time when people were coming back from visiting the shrine.

Even once the train eventually came and we got on, the seats were quickly filled, and we were forced to stand. Well, it was about two stations at the most. I was tired, but I could deal.

The train swayed as it left the station, and I staggered reflexively, my hand grabbing for the hand strap.

That was when I felt something catching on the edge of my coat. Looking over, a small white hand was grasping the hem.

It steadied my grip on the hanging strap and my legs against the inertia.

The train was filled with noise: the vibrations of the wheels running along the tracks, the sound of the wind hitting the windows, and the murmuring of the riders within. And yet, with each sway of the train, my ears just barely picked up the breathing coming from my right.

…Well, it's crowded, and we're swaying. It's fine.

Though we were standing pretty close, we didn't really talk, and my eyes drifted toward the hanging ads and the ads above the windows.

Eventually, they landed on a transit map, which brought a sudden question to mind.

"Wait, should you be coming this direction?" I asked.

Yukinoshita tilted her head, looking puzzled. "My home is toward Tokyo, so this should be the right train…" Setting her hand against her chin, Yukinoshita checked the transit map as well. *Is she not sure? Well, she does lack all sense of direction…*

"No, I just thought maybe you'd be going to your parents' place, since it's New Year's."

"Oh, that's what you mean… I'm not going back this year. It's not as if I have any particular business there. And it's troublesome, for various reasons…"

"I see." I didn't know very much about Yukinoshita's relationship with her family. Not sure how far I should be intruding,

I just made a remark of acknowledgment.

That hesitance must have revealed itself on my face, as Yukinoshita smiled. “It’s not really a big deal. New Year’s is a very busy time. I just avoid unnecessary contact because I doubt it would be pleasant for either of us if I were to go back. And…,” she continued, “it makes little difference whether I’m there or not.”

With that, she looked out the window toward the scenery quickly flowing past.

“I think that’s fine.”

“Hmm?” She turned around, a little surprised.

“If it doesn’t matter if you’re there or not. That’s easy to deal with, and you aren’t causing trouble for anyone. Some people make things uncomfortable just by being around, after all.”

“Is that a self-introduction?” Yukinoshita giggled with a somewhat mean little smile.

“You got it. That’s why I’ve always avoided contact with people as much as possible. Everything is nice and peaceful because I’m so considerate, so I’d appreciate some thanks for that.”

“If you were truly considerate, you wouldn’t be asking for a reward.”

I see. Chii is learning. Consideration…doesn’t expect…reward. But though consideration won’t get you rewards, a lack of it will get you in trouble. It’s so unfair.

Eventually, the train stopped.

This was my station. Yukinoshita would be getting on the bus a station ahead.

“Ah, this is my stop,” I said.

“Mm-hmm.”

With a nod her way, I stepped off onto the platform. “See you.”

I turned around to add *Take care on your way back* right before the doors closed. In the train, Yukinoshita was looking down as she said in a little whisper, “…Let’s have another good year.”

2

As usual, **Haruno Yukinoshita** stirs things up.

Looking up at the clear winter sky, I saw the monorail running above.

Komachi, standing beside me, followed my gaze. Then she blew a tired, white sigh. “Agh.”

“Sorry for making you come with me,” I said.

“Seriously,” Komachi replied with a rough snort. She sounded just like our family cat, Kamakura. He reacts like that when you call his name, too. Maybe he’s copying his master…

“Well, Komachi wanted to buy a present, too, so I don’t mind,” she said, and another white puff rose in the air. “…Besides, this might be the last time I’ll be going out with you.”

“When you say that with a sad smile, it’s like I’m gonna die…”

She sounded as if she was making the final memories of a lifetime with someone with a fatal illness. If this were made into a movie, I’d definitely bawl like Nobita saying his final farewell to Doraemon. But actually, even if I’m not sick, Big Bro can’t live on if Komachi hates me…

“That’s not what I mean… It’s ’cause I’m not coming next time,” she warned with a little glare.

No, I understand, Komachi…

I got that the “next time” Komachi mentioned was coming. I don’t know if I can call it a promise, but I had basically meant it to be. The problem was when, and where, and in what way, and what I should say. When you don’t have much experience with the whole socializing thing, you don’t know what to do at times like these. How do people make invitations when they go to hang out?

Well, whatever.

Anyway, first today.

After coming back from the shrine visit the other day, I’d gotten

a text from Yuigahama about shopping for presents.

We would be meeting in front of the big ad screens at Chiba Station. You couldn't get any more clear than that. Once she came out of the station, she'd be able to see us right away. The reverse was also true. The white puffs from my mouth started coming faster as I thought about it.

Eventually, Yuigahama came over from the ticket gates. When she noticed us, she waved her hands wide. "Yahallo!"

"Hey."

"Yahallo to you, too, Yui!"

"Sorry I'm a little late!" Yuigahama's beige overcoat was flapping restlessly, the soles of her boots clopping along as she ran. With every flutter of her coat hem, I could see the long knit sweater that went nearly to her knees and her slim jeans.

"So where are we going?" I asked.

"I figured we'd wander a bit to pick something," Yuigahama said, and while pointing all around the station area, she started walking.

"Yeah, where should we go first?" Komachi followed after her, and I followed Komachi.

Chiba is a shopping paradise.

And the standard shopping site for high school kids is the PARCO.

Ah, PARCO—the most powerful ally of the youth of Chiba city. I think the hip, fashionable youths of modern Chiba have got to be divided into two conflicting sects when it comes to where to buy clothing: You've got the PARCOists and the LaLaportists. And even among the PARCOists, I'd bet it's an ugly battle between the Chiba PARCO faction and the Tsudanuma PARCO faction.

Stop it! Everyone, be friends! We're all the same citizens of Chiba city! Though Tsudanuma is in Narashino city!

After a little walking, Yuigahama pointed. "Oh. Then let's start with C-one!"

C-one. I know that one. It's that place with the Ichiran ramen.

I'm familiar with Ichiran for its flavor-focus system that enables you to devote your concentration to eating, thanks to the counter seats being partitioned from each other. By the way, this flavor-focus system is patented. If you're going with that logic, that means loners are equipped with a life-focusing system. Hurry! I've got to patent that right now!

The *C* in C-one is probably the *C* in Chiba. In other words, it's an initialism. This is clear in the naming of the local superhero, Captain ☆ C. By the way, Chibatman is not the local superhero, just so you know.

When we walked in, the inside of the mall was done up in New Year's decorations with lines of shops along the way. Since it was making use of the roof over the narrow lane, the long, straight road went on and on. Perhaps because of the New Year's / Christmas sales or whatnot, the avenue was busier than usual.

Even with such noisy crowds around, it seemed girls shopping together would chatter a little bit too loudly as they excitedly discussed the latest fashion. Of course, a boy couldn't join in on that, so I stood about three steps back, immediately feeling very much that I was going to get left behind.

"Komachi-chan! Look at this! Isn't it cute?!"

"Oh, it really is! You can take off this fur, so it can go with all kinds of things!"

"Right! So then maybe you could wear it in the spring, too!" The two of them picked up this or that item of clothing as they chattered away enthusiastically.

Not like I care, but we came here to buy a present for Yukinoshita, right? You're not shopping for yourselves, right?

But watching them, I felt like I was watching girls in their natural habitat.

Yuigahama was busy putting on a furred parka, spinning around in front of the full-length mirror.

Being a boy, I just couldn't bring myself to go into the shop, so I decided to watch over them from a distance.

Komachi ambled over toward me then. Her expression seemed somehow more relaxed than usual. "It's so easy to go shopping with Yui…"

"Well, compared with Yukinoshita…" When the three of us had gone out to buy a present for Yuigahama before, I'd been surprised at how out of touch Yukinoshita was with modern high school girl sensibilities.

"Yeah, it really was just as bad as when I was just going out with you… Well, that side of her is supercute, too, though! Right?" Komachi examined my face.

"Yeah, that side of me isn't cute, huh?"

"Hmm, you *hinedere*…"

Leave me alone.

Well, and besides, it would be rude to treat me and Yukinoshita the same way.

At the very least, Yukinoshita seems to have a grasp of what looks good on her, and it's not as if she's totally disinterested in fashion. So maybe the reason she'd still struggled when we went to buy a present for Yuigahama's birthday was because it was choosing for someone else that she was bad at.

That overserious awkwardness is very like her.

The question here was what to do in a situation where Miss Awkward was the one receiving a present.

"I'm gonna go look around." Leaving Yukinoshita and Komachi, I decided to wander aimlessly around the area. If I thought about it while actually looking at the options, then maybe I'd get a few ideas.

A present for Yukinoshita, huh…?

What could I get…?

Yukinoshita is a straightforward person. You could call her Yuki-no-sweetness or Yukinon-sugar, but what to do with her? She'd prefer practical things if it's outside of her personal tastes. Or more like, with her tastes, books are something she can get on her own, and she lives alone, so she can probably handle household items and cooking tools herself. I mean, she's got a cutting board as standard equipment on her chest.

What, what, what should I get…?

As I was wandering around, a Destiny merch store caught my eye.

Hmm, Grue-bear… But she would know way more about that stuff than me, so strike that.

Farther down, there was a pet supply store.

A cat…is not something she actually owns… She doesn't have a cat, huh? She should just get one already. Are cats not allowed at her apartment? I could give her something like a cat photo book, but I bet she'd already have a lot of them…

But then there's that accessory-shop sort of place over there, but I don't know what to get…

While I was busy doing circles about the shops in the area and groaning to myself, I wound up right where I'd started.

And there was Yuigahama, a bunch of clothing in her arms and looking all around. "Huh? Where's Komachi-chan?"

“Wasn’t she with you?”

“I thought she was with you, Hikki…” Leaning over a bit, Yuigahama examined my face to see what was up.

Ahhh, she’s done it again…

I was very aware that when Komachi got like this, there was no use calling for her. I was grateful that she’d just come with me at all, so it was fine, but I wished she would’ve at least said something. I need to emotionally prepare, you know. Don’t suplex me to the ground and then just leave me lying there.

With a *hmm*, Yuigahama seemed to consider for a bit, but then she adjusted her grip on the bundle of clothes in her arms and tilted her head to examine me. “I couldn’t really make up my mind… I wanted Komachi-chan to take a look for me, but…can you, Hikki?”

“If you don’t mind me not being useful.”

“Okay! …Oh, I want you to be useful, though…”

“I’ll do my best,” I said, and Yuigahama headed over to the full-length mirror at the back of the store. I followed after her.

“A sweater or a cardigan you could wear over top of a blouse, so I was thinking maybe she could use this one even at school,” Yuigahama said, taking off her coat and then the sweater she wore underneath that.

I kind of felt like I shouldn’t watch, so I immediately averted my eyes. *Use the changing room… Do you just, like, not worry about that sort of thing ’cause you’re wearing a shirt underneath? Still, please don’t.* I *worry about it.*

Though I knew there was background music in the shop, the sound of clothes rustling was weirdly loud, and I couldn’t block out the sound of Yuigahama’s breathing.

“There we go… So?” she said, and finally, I could turn around.

It was a fluffy, warm-looking warp-knit cardigan.

“I dunno… Well, I think it’s fine…”

It wasn’t just fine. It looked really good on her.

But if there was one problem, it was that this was not for Yuigahama but a present for Yukinoshita. If Yukinoshita put on that cardigan, I think there might be too much fabric… Um, well, though I won’t say where.

“You don’t have to consider Yukinoshita’s size, though?” I said.

The basics of choosing clothing is to wear a size that fits you. Silhouette and stuff is important, too, but, well, that’s just me repeating what Komachi has told me. By the way, my clothes that

day had also undergone a thorough Komachi fashion check. The clothing I'd chosen had been reviewed harshly: "I'll stomp on it!" No, that was Piiko, wasn't it? Or wait, was it Osugi? Well, whatever.

"Size…" Repeating that word, Yuigahama grabbed at a fold of her own stomach area. "Maybe I'm too big…," she said with a look of despair. Then she moved her hand from her stomach area to her upper arm, and her expression grew even darker.

It's okay! You're not big! I mean you're big, but you're not! You're just not small.

"No, um, you're fine. Actually, you're just right, like…"

This wasn't much of a defense, but I did basically make a haphazard attempt at smoothing that over. But it seemed all my suspicious behavior won me was a suspicious glare from Yuigahama. *Agh, geez! What's the right way to answer at a time like this!*

"Well, it looks good on you, so I think it's fine," I somehow managed to say.

"…Eh-heh-heh, thanks." Yuigahama finally smiled, taking off the cardigan to cheerily begin folding it up. There was no way I could just watch her, so I was turning away in embarrassment—and then suddenly I realized.

"But Yukinoshita normally dresses to regulation, so I doubt she'd wear something like that at school."

Our school regulations were really bare-bones, but we did have them. And of course, part of that was rules about clothing, and there were school-designated sweaters and cardigans. There weren't many students who dutifully stuck to those rules, and it wasn't something to worry about—but some more conscientious students, like Yukinoshita, did follow those rules to the letter.

"Oh. Yeah, of course. So then…" Yuigahama still held the cardigan under her arm as she pondered, but this time, her feet took her over to a shelf that featured small articles like scarves and gloves.

As she rummaged over the shelf, she called out with a quiet *ah*. "So cute! It might be fun to play with Sablé using these," she said, pulling out a pair of mittens designed to be like cat paws—and another pair that were designed in imitation of dog faces.

The cat-paw mittens were, like, just straight cat paws. But the dog-face mittens featured the face and ears of dogs on the backs of

the hands, while the thumb side was the lower jaw. Yuigahama put them on and waved her hands around. “It’s kinda hard to grab things…”

“Well, yeah. They’re mittens.”

Yuigahama gave a thoughtful *hmm*, then lifted her face like a thought had hit her, and then suddenly, she opened up her closed hands. “Yeah! Chomp!”

Then a mitten doggy came up to bite my hand.

“…J-just messing with you,” she said, as if covering her embarrassment while she blushed.

If you find it embarrassing, then please don’t do it. I’m embarrassed, too. I gently slipped away from the mitten and then fanned at my face a little with that hand. *They have the heat up too high in this store.*

“Not like it matters, but she’s not gonna wear a design like that outside of the house.”

“…Maybe you’re right.” Yuigahama nodded in agreement.

Based on what Yukinoshita typically wore, I actually did get the impression that she didn’t wear anything blatantly cutesy. Would she even use them if she got them as a gift? …Or maybe she would. If they were a present from Yuigahama, she might actually put on this cool and collected expression, while on the inside, she was all excited to put them on.

“I guess I have to look for something else…” Cat-paw mittens dangling from her hands, Yuigahama mulled and mulled over it, then continued rummaging further. “Oh, this might be good,” she said as she pulled from the shelf some socks that looked a lot like cat feet.

“Socks, huh? Those look kind of hard to put shoes over.”

“They’re indoor socks! You obviously wouldn’t wear these out of the house.”

Using that logic, I think she’d never wear those mittens outside, either… Well, but now that she pointed it out, the sole of the sock had grippy rubber in the pattern of toe beans.

“You wear them at home, so she wouldn’t have to worry about appearances… What do you think?”

“Well, I think she’d like it.” I think Yukinoshita would be glad to receive anything Yuigahama gave to her. The person giving it to you is more important than the gift itself. And who says something is more important than what is said, too.

“Okay, then I’ll go with this.” Gathering up all the things in her arms, Yuigahama headed for the register. Her bundle contained that cardigan and a pair of mittens, too.

So she’s giving her the cat-paw mittens, too, huh…?

Cat hands and cat feet, huh…?

This place doesn’t sell tails, too, do they?

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All right, now I’ve got to actually go look for stuff myself. Since that store just now had not sold cat tails.

And so I had come. Sencity Sogo: Chiba branch. The name alone makes it seem like it would have its finger on the pulse of modern trends. Wait, no, that’s *sensitivity*.

Normally, I’d go to the menswear section, but that day, I’d come to buy a present for Yukinoshita. Naturally, we wound up heading to the floor with the ladies’ things.

But still, it’s not like I know anything about women’s clothing, so Yuigahama was leading the way.

Yuigahama chose a place that sold not only clothing but also various types of accessories and small articles.

“We should check out lots of stuff, right? Gloves and accessories and scarves and…like, all kinds of stuff,” she said, so I went rummaging through a bunch of things in the store.

From nearby, Yuigahama came over to recommend this and that to me, so the staff didn’t keep an eye on me for the time being, and the security guards didn’t even start hovering conspicuously. If I’d gone in there alone, the staff would have asked me, *Are you looking for anything?* I definitely would have had them trailing close behind me and felt them watching me from behind the register. Source: me, the time I wandered in here before. I understand that a guy alone is unusual, but I would appreciate it if you would, um, lower the security level a little…

I was moving from shelf to shelf, keeping an eye out for looks from the staff, when Yuigahama’s feet stopped. The pop sign on that shelf said *eyewear* in English.

The hell is *ai-uea*? Just say “glasses” in Japanese, come on. Spewing katakana words for everything and its dog, it’s like, are you one of those higher-consciousness types or what? And instead

of *hangaa*, you can just call clothes hangers *emongake*. And calling meat sauce *bolognese* or calling pasta *spaghetti*—I mean, good grief. Wait, *miito soosu* and *pasuta* were alredy katakana, huh…? What should you call that in Japanese…?

As I was ruminating over this, Yuigahama came over to tap-tap my shoulder.

Turning around, I saw she looked proud for some reason as she pushed a pair of glasses up her nose. “Heh-heh. These make me look kinda smart, don’cha think?”

“The idea that glasses equal smart is already pretty dumb…”

“Oh, shut up, jerk,” she said sulkily, and then she continued to pick up various types of eyewear, checking out their designs.

I copied her and picked something up. *Hmm, they’ve got lots of stuff, huh?*

Not just in terms of design—they were also functional. They had notes that said they helped prevent pollen allergies or cut blue light or whatnot. Wearing glasses is pretty normalized these days, even aside from the basic goal of vision correction, so the prices were fairly reasonable, too.

As we continued to rummage through them, Yuigahama offered me a pair. “Ah. Here, you try some on, too, Hikki. Like these.”

“Huh…?” *This is definitely going to end with me getting mocked…*

When I hesitated, she pressed me, shoving the glasses at me. “Come on—do it!”

I resolved myself, psyching myself up to put on these glasses. *Per…sona…!* By the way, I prefer 3 over 4. I would absolutely prefer to summon my persona with a gun to my head!

“Something like this?” The glasses clicked as I slid them on, and I pushed the frames up with a finger.

Yuigahama burst out laughing. “Wow, that looks bad!”

“Shut up…” *This is why I didn’t want to do this…*

Annoyed, I removed the glasses, and Yuigahama handed over another pair with a different design. “Then next…here!”

“No.”

“Come on—take them!” she said, shoving them onto my face.

Agh, obnoxious… Adjusting the glasses that had only halfway hooked over my ears, I turned back to Yuigahama, ready to protest.

And then Yuigahama stared at me, mouth hanging open dumbly.

“…”

“Uh, silence?”

She can’t just not react when she’s the one who suggested this… I looked over at her, wondering what I should say.

Noticing that, Yuigahama panicked and waved her hands. “Ah, no, it’s nothing… I’m surprised. Those kinda actually suit you…”

“…Well, thanks.” I didn’t know how to react to that compliment from her, either.

But she’s surprised, huh?

There are a lot of things you’ll think you know but then find you actually don’t. Like how Yuigahama, who normally doesn’t wear glasses, looks surprisingly good in them when she does try them on.

Yukinoshita had once regretfully said that she still didn't know Yuigahama at all.

The same went for me.

I'd never really tried to find out before.

And I think not just about Yukinoshita but about Yuigahama, too.

The three of us had spent time together now, though. I obviously can't claim to understand them, and it's far from ideal. Just over six months is not much time at all. But I did know them a little more now, compared with before.

The Yukino Yukinoshita I know…

She's someone who will crumble when Yuigahama needles her, and she loves cats, and on weekends, she cuddles a Grue-bear cushion while she looks at cat videos on her computer.

I know more than I thought.

If Yuigahama was going to give her cat-paw indoor socks, then I'd give her something that would match that.

In hopes that the time she spent alone would be warm and peaceful.

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We finished shopping, and since we'd been on our feet for a while, we decided to go to a café where we could take a break. We could've gone to the Starbucks outside, but this time of year was really cold. Also, I didn't know how to order there, so I really didn't want to go that day.

So I decided to go to a place I had gone to a few times before and was used to.

"Can we go here?"

"Sure."

Once Yuigahama agreed, we went into a café that was inside the Sogo. It was deep inside the mall, so maybe that was why it was calm and not too busy.

"For two." I told the server the number of people, and we were shown to a four-person table right by the window where you could see out to Chiba Station below. I yielded the window seat to Yuigahama and gazed out at Chiba Station behind her.

I could also see the monorail running along, too, and it kinda seemed like Chiba was developing a lot. Chiba really is the city of the future.

When I visually traced the path of the monorail, my eyes met with those of the person sitting at a diagonal from me.

"Oh, it's Hikigaya."

That person also had her back to the window, sitting on a sofa.

She wore a mostly white frilled shirt with a gold chain necklace dangling over her chest. She was sparkling as if she'd gathered the light from outside into her body, but her gleefully smiling eyes were a darker black than the sky after dusk. And to pull her whole mismatched appearance together, Haruno Yukinoshita brought her vivid red scarf over her shoulders as she called my name.

When she called out to me, Yuigahama's eyes also slid to the side, calling out her name in surprise. "Haruno…and…"

Then Yuigahama's gaze shifted to the person in front of Haruno. The guy there wore a gray shirt and a black jacket. Under his brown, nearly faint gold hair were eyes that were surprised but still smiling—it was Hayato Hayama.

"It's Hayato."

"…Hey," Hayama called out briefly. A wristwatch that shone dull silver peeked out from his slightly raised cuff.

I responded with a casual nod. We didn't exchange any other words, and all we could hear was the faintly playing jazz. And the sound of a chair pulling back.

"I don't think I've seen you in quite a while, Gahama-chan," Haruno said, sliding over to our table like it was a natural thing. In response, Hayama breathed a short sigh, and with the order slip in his hand, he came to sit down next to me.

"A date, huh? Ohhh, you rascal! You guys are close, as usual, huh? Yukino-chan isn't with you?" After giving Yuigahama a couple of elbow jabs, Haruno looked over toward the entrance of the café.

"Oh, today we just came out to buy a present for Yukinon…"

"Ahhh, it's almost her birthday, huh? …Ohhh, I see." Nodding and murmuring "Mm-hmm," Haruno listened to Yuigahama but then slid out her phone and started making a call.

Watching her, Hayama offered hesitantly, "…She might not pick up."

"No, I think she'll probably pick up today," Haruno said, her smile filled with certainty.

In the quiet café, you could just barely hear the call sound from her phone.

It rang twice, three times, and then a few more, and eventually she got through, and a quiet voice could be heard.

"Hello…"

"Ah, Yukino-chan? It's your big sister! Can you come over now?"

"I'm hanging up."

That was fast!

Yuigahama and Hayama heard the immediate comeback from beside Haruno and smiled awkwardly.

But Haruno must have been used to that sort of reaction, as she continued her teasing unperturbed. "Ohhh? Is it a good idea for you to hang up?"

"…What?"

Haruno smirked. "Actually, right now I'm with Hikigaya!"

"You and your ridiculous lies… You need to cut this out."

"Here, Hikigaya." And before Haruno even finished speaking, she pushed the phone at me.

"Wait—huh?" I looked between the cell phone in my hands and Haruno, but she hid her hands behind her back, feigning ignorance. It seemed she had absolutely no intention of taking it back. On the other side of the receiver, I could hear Yukinoshita's voice calling for Haruno.

What can you do…? Guess I'll just talk to her…

"Uhhh…hello," I said for now, not knowing what else to say.

On the other end, I heard a little gasp.

Then after a brief silence, there was a sigh. "Agh, I'm amazed… Why are you there?"

I would have liked to ask that myself. I'd thought I would just be going shopping… *Why am I here?! Why am I here?! Dowa-ha-ha-ha! It's because of* youkai. *It's not my fault. It's because of* youkai.

"Uh, I just happened to be out, and she kind of caught me…" I flicked a glare over at said *youkai* as I tried to explain, but I was cut off by the sound of another sigh.

"Fine. I'm coming now, so give the phone to my sister."

"…Okay. I'm sorry," I apologized for some reason.

After wiping the screen with a moist towelette, I returned the cell phone to Haruno, who exchanged a few remarks with Yukinoshita, telling her where we were, then hung up the phone.

“Yukino-chan says she’s coming,” Haruno said with a satisfied smile.

Then Yuigahama hesitantly cut in. “Um, why did you call her out here? She seemed like she didn’t want to come…”

“Hmm? Ah, our family is going out to eat later, and Yukino-chan refused. But if I say all of you are here, then she has to come, right?”

“You’re making us hostages…,” I muttered.

“Oh, that’s such an ugly word. But isn’t it a nice story—rushing over to save your friends who were captured in your place?”

“If we’re going with that story, then just who here is the wicked and ruthless king?”

“Ohhh, we have a little literary enthusiast here,” Haruno said gleefully, like she was teasing me.

Yuigahama tilted her head like, *Hmm?*

Hayama smiled a little at her. “It’s ‘Run, Melos!’”

“Oh, ohhh, um, that one, yeah. Uh-huh, I know it. I’ve heard of it before; it’s superfast, huh?!”

Does she really know what it is…? It’s the one that’s like…*Melos raaan…Melos and Selinuntius aaare…the bestest of friends!!*

When I showed doubt, Yuigahama avoided my look by hurriedly changing the subject. “But anyway, a family dinner, that’s nice! Everyone all together! Um…” Yuigahama looked over at Hayama.

Sensing what she meant by that, Hayama picked up where she left off. “Our parents have always been close… They were talking about us all having dinner together, while they were out doing New Year’s greetings. I’ve just been dragged along.”

“Oh, huh…” Yuigahama accepted the explanation.

Haruno stroked the rim of her teacup with a little sigh. “On New Year’s Day, they’re all occupied with family matters, and work starts up again on the fourth, and the day before that is also quite busy, so this is the day they go around to pay New Year’s respects to acquaintances.”

It seemed this was a customary event for the Yukinoshita family. But if they were about to go have dinner, then were Yukinoshita’s parents nearby? …I kind of wanted to see them, just a little.

Pretending to stretch a little, I checked out my surroundings. But Haruno, sitting diagonally from me, just giggled. Bet she saw

right through my little trick.

"Our parents are doing their social rounds elsewhere right now. We're waiting for them."

"Ohhh, I see…" That made sense. When the parents have something going on, the kids usually get left behind together. Back when my mom was working with a co-op, the mommy friends would get together, so then their children would all be lumped together, too. But you know, Mommy, just because you're friends doesn't mean your kids will be… Those times were really uncomfortable.

Yuigahama gave an impressed *ohhh*. "Going around to do New Year's greetings… That sounds tough."

"They do it every year, so we're used to it. Well, sometimes I do feel it's a real hassle, though. Those sorts of customs and traditions are more alive than you think, you know." There was an indescribable resignation in her voice.

For both Yukinoshita and Hayama, who hadn't come to the New Year's shrine visit, there were social expectations.

I'm sure the distinguished families, *good households*, are under all kinds of constraints. It might not feel truly real to us commoners, but it is, and there's nothing you can do about that. Well, it's not unusual for some families to have close relationships with extended family. I think it's just that I'm not familiar with such things myself, and there are actually a lot of families that have their own unique communities.

Even us common people have to deal with similar issues. So then, add titles onto that, and the constraints will increase correspondingly.

As if to dispel her sigh just now, Haruno smacked the table and straightened her posture. "Anyway, what presents are you going to give her?" she asked, inching toward Yuigahama, who was sitting on the same sofa.

With a wince as she inched away from her, Yuigahama showed her the bag, rustling it. "Um… I got her some indoor socks and stuff…"

"Hmm, the floors are cold around this time of year, after all."

"Yeah! And the living room at Yukinon's place is hardwood floors, and when I went over the other day, I thought, *Huh, it's kinda cold*."

"I tend to be cold a lot, too, so I get it."

While they had their girlish conversation, we guys were just listening to them talk.

But Hayama must have felt at loose ends, as he muttered quietly, “Birthday presents, huh…?” Then he glanced over at me. “What did you get?”

“Oh, well, stuff.”

“I see.” He added nothing more, his gaze sliding away. After that, Hayama continued to listen to Haruno and Yuigahama’s conversation, occasionally nodding along. The second hand ticked slowly along on his wristwatch as he held his cup.

I just tracked it with my eyes.

Always ticking out the same perfect rhythm, the needle moved in its fixed pattern. It did one circle, then two, returning to the same place to create a similar face. But not exactly the same. Even if the second hand never changed, the time it pointed to continued forward.

Suddenly, Haruno, who had been looking at the present’s wrapping, said, “Maybe I’ll give her something, too; it’s been a while.” Then her gaze jumped. “How about it, Hayato?”

“…Yeah.” Hayama gave a little shrug, then looked out the window. I think it probably wasn’t the streetlights he was looking at.

I looked over at Hayama’s reflection in the glass as well, and then suddenly, I couldn’t stop wondering about what present Haruno had given her long ago.

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We spent an uncomfortable span of time together.

About thirty minutes had passed since Haruno had called Yukinoshita. If she was coming from her apartment, she’d probably take a little longer. And since Haruno had called her over, we couldn’t just decide to leave now.

The coffee I’d been slowly sipping at had long gone empty, and the black teapot that had been steaming before was now completely cold.

I wasn’t the only impatient one—Yuigahama seemed rather antsy, too, looking all round. Then she noticed something and made a noise, and I followed her gaze to see Yukinoshita striding briskly

toward us.

"Yukinooon, over here, over here!" Yuigahama said, waving.

Noticing her, Yukinoshita came over to the table where we sat. "Yuigahama…you're here, too?" she said, sounding surprised. Haruno hadn't mentioned that on the phone after all.

"Yeah, yeah. Um…it's like, I was shopping with Hikki, when she kind of caught us…" Yuigahama spoke vaguely, like she was unsure as to whether she should say that we'd come shopping for a present for Yukinoshita.

Hearing that, Yukinoshita looked between me and Yuigahama, her expression questioning. "Shopping… I—I see…"

"Anyway, sit, sit," Yuigahama said, getting up from the sofa to make a person's worth of space there and inviting her over.

Inevitably, Yukinoshita sat down in a position where she wouldn't be facing Haruno. Then she bowed her head to Yuigahama. "I'm sorry my sister's bothering you."

"No, it's totally okay." Cheerfully, Yuigahama gave a casual wave in reply.

Yukinoshita breathed a sigh in mild relief. Turning back to me, she looked up at me searchingly. "You too, Hikigaya, um…"

"It's fine. I had nothing better to do anyway." I actually hadn't had any plans for after this shopping trip. In fact, maybe this was easier on me, since Haruno roping us into things had kept me from winding up alone with Yuigahama. But still, if you asked me if this was for the best, the answer would absolutely be no.

And as for the cause of this disaster, she was wearing a provocative smile. "Yukino-chan, you're late!" she said teasingly.

"*You* called me here out of nowhere. You're shameless…" Yukinoshita glared at her out of the corner of her eye, and Haruno took that with composure. Yuigahama, sandwiched between them, was smiling uncomfortably. *Please, no* Yukinoshita Sisters Melee *here…*

"Come on, Haruno, it looks like Yukino-chan hurried over pretty quickly…"

It was a familiar and charming voice, softening the tension. Its use of an unfamiliar form of address made me automatically turn around. And then the owner of that voice, Hayato Hayama, scrunched up his face like, *Oh, damn*, then immediately covered that up with a smile.

"…"

Yukinoshita seemed surprised, looking at Hayama wordlessly.

Hayama shrugged. “What do you want to drink, Yukinoshita?”

“…Black tea, then.”

Accepting that, Hayama swiftly got the ordering done, and when the tea came, Haruno let out a little *ohhh*.

“It’s been a long time since we all had tea together, huh?”

“It has.”

“…”

Though Hayama replied with agreement, Yukinoshita’s eyes remained closed, cup in hand.

When the conversation trailed off, Yuigahama grasped for a way to get it started again. “Ah, um…you’ve known each other for a long time, too, huh, Hayato?”

“Yep, yep,” said Haruno. “Hayato’s family just has the one boy, you know? So his parents have always doted on us. Isn’t that right, Yukino-chan?”

“Not really me.”

“That’s not true. Everyone doted on you, not just our parents.”

Even with Haruno addressing her and Hayama’s smiles, Yukinoshita’s attitude didn’t change.

But Haruno didn’t seem bothered, gazing softly into the distance. “This takes me back… When we were little, whenever our parents had some business together, I’d babysit the two of them.”

Yukinoshita’s brows twitched and came together. “Are you sure you don’t mean forcing us to follow you around? It was awful.” She set her cup down on her saucer with a *click*, letting Haruno feel her quiet tone and chilly gaze.

That made Hayama react. “Ahhh, like that time at the zoo, huh…? There was that awful experience in the amusement park zone…”

“And at the seaside park. She would leave us behind or shake the Ferris wheel…”

As they recalled days gone by, Hayama’s and Yukinoshita’s expressions both darkened.

Only Haruno was nodding along cheerfully. “Oh yeah, yeah. Then Yukino-chan would basically always cry, huh?”

“Hey…stop fabricating memories,” said Yukinoshita.

“I’m not fabricating anything. Right, Hayato?” Haruno turned to him.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha… I don’t know,” Hayama said noncommittally

with a smile, and Yukinoshita nodded without a word.

This nostalgic conversation among the trio made me suddenly feel something quite keenly.

Clearly, they had spent time and built memories together, and those memories couldn't be touched by outsiders.

Yuigahama didn't really look like she could join their conversation, either. And of course I couldn't.

I don't know what their relationships had once been like. And even if I did, I couldn't change them.

All I could do was occasionally bring my bitter coffee to my lips and let the reminiscing go in one ear and out the other as I made listening noises. And imagined.

Someone had once asked me how things would have gone if I'd gone to the same elementary school as them.

How had I replied, then?

I was deep in thoughtful recollection when I heard the sound of a cup being set down. Looking over, I saw Haruno leaning her cheek on her hand, watching Hayama and Yukinoshita with eyes that lacked any warmth.

"You two were so cute then… Now…you're kind of boring."

As beautiful as her well-formed, glossy lips were, they spoke cruel, cold words. Everyone there was speechless.

Yukinoshita made a fist just slightly on the table, while Hayama clenched his teeth and looked away. Yuigahama gave me a lost look.

When the table went dead silent, Haruno giggled. "Well, but now I have Hikigaya. I guess I can just give him my attention instead."

"Uh, I get the sense you mean that like a drill coach…"

"That's just the sort of thing that makes me want to pamper you. What a good little Hachiman you are! Good Hachiman!" she said, reaching out to attempt to pet my head. I bent myself backward to smoothly avoid her hand.

"Oh no, he ran away," Haruno said, smiling brightly like a good-natured big sister. Being smiled at by a pretty older woman isn't something I get to experience all that often, and it didn't feel bad. I even didn't completely mind if that smile was a lie. Anyone can play the duplicitous game of pretending to be cute. Iroha Isshiki does it, too. It's not anything to be scared of.

But the way Haruno Yukinoshita showed that unknown

something that lurks beneath was scary.

But it seemed she didn't intend to say any more right now, and she changed the topic, still grinning. "Speaking of drill coaches, your school marathon is coming up, isn't it?"

"Oh. Yes. Around the end of the month," Yuigahama answered.

Haruno looked somewhat surprised. "Huh, so it's not in February this year."

"I heard from our club teacher-advisor that it's being moved up a little due to how the calendar happened to work out," Hayama replied with a soft smile as if nothing at all had happened.

Alas, our dear Miss Yukinoshita seemed to abandon all hope at that. *Well, she has no endurance… I get the impression she'd be really bad at marathons.*

But regardless, the atmosphere brightened once again.

This was fine, but the four of them chatting pleasantly together really did tend to gather attention. It wasn't like they were especially obnoxious, but they had an attractive aura. *These people really do stand out…*

For a while now, I'd felt glances coming at us from the entrance area.

Well, this was partly because they were being a little loud right now, but they were all attractive people. If you saw them walking around town, you'd find yourself turning your head.

Thanks to these four, I felt like my presence had faded even more. *I am a shadow…* But the thicker the shadow becomes, the more prominent it makes the white of the light…

There wasn't particularly anything for me to do, so alone, I decided to commit to being a behind-the-scenes support, like one of those stagehands dressed in all black. *No, I will be even darker than black…*

As I avoided joining the conversation and was a machine that lifted my cup to my mouth, I drank down the coffee. *Since I'm here, one more…*, I thought, searching for a server, when I saw a woman in a kimono coming over toward us.

Her glossy black hair was in an updo, and she had a collected air about her. She seemed a bit younger than my own parents. Her proportions were symmetrical, and the way she walked, every moment was soft and silent. But something about her composed expression gave me an odd sense of déjà vu.

I thought instinctively, *They look alike.*

The lady came straight over to our table without hesitation and called out, “Haruno.”

Even among the voices of chatting customers and the faintly playing background music, her voice carried well, drawing the attention of those who heard it. It reminded me of a certain someone.

Haruno turned around. “Ah, you’re done talking?”

“Yes. We’re going to eat after this, so I came to call you. Sorry for making you wait, Hayato.”

“Oh, no, don’t worry. Everyone kept me from being bored,” Hayama replied in a sociable manner as he looked over at us, and the lady scanned us, too.

Yukinoshita’s presence must have been quite unexpected. “Oh my,” she said in a breathless little murmur. Then she put on a meek smile. “I wasn’t expecting to see you here, Yukino. I’m so glad…”

“Mom…,” Yukinoshita muttered. Stunned or possibly despondent.

Now that the woman had been identified, I noticed that she resembled Yukinoshita in her air and her appearance. Once Yukinoshita was older, she would surely be this woman’s spitting image. But I hadn’t noticed that at first because her mother had a coercive force to her. It was hard to speak to her casually—maybe the word for that force was *dignity*. My back automatically straightened.

Yukinoshita swallowed, hugging herself with her hands to her elbows and looking away like she had no place to put herself.

What must her mother have thought? She was smiling peacefully.

Beside the silenced Yukinoshita, Yuigahama quietly whispered with surprise, “Yeek, she’s so pretty…”

Yukinoshita’s mother bowed slightly at us, and she turned to Haruno. “Your friends, Haruno?”

“Yeah. Hachiman and Gahama-chan.” Either Haruno was rolling with her unpleasant joke from before, or she just thought it’d be a hassle to explain, as she introduced us in an incredibly lazy manner.

“Oh, I’m Yui Yuigahama, Yukinon’s friend.” Yuigahama hurriedly bobbed her head in a bow, and I bowed as well.

Introducing yourself to a girl’s parents makes me a little nervous… As I hesitated to introduce myself, Yukinoshita’s mother latched on

to something Yuigahama had said.

“Yukinon…” She touched her hand to her chin and narrowed her eyes, looking between Yukinoshita and Yuigahama. “Oh, I’m sorry. You were *Yukino’s* friend, hmm? You looked mature, so I mistook.”

“Mature…eh-heh-heh.”

Yuigahama seemed glad, but I felt there was something a little off about what she said.

I think Yuigahama is more the innocent-looking type, if anything. She doesn't exactly act the most put together.

But it seemed that error was naught but a trifle, and Yukinoshita's mother put her hand to her cheek. "My, I see… Hayato is the only one of Yukino's classmates I know, so… Please continue to stay close with her," she said gladly to Yuigahama.

"I will!"

Hearing Yuigahama's cheerful answer, Yukinoshita's mother dipped her head slightly. I'd missed the opportunity to offer my own name, but it didn't seem like she was particularly interested in me anyway, and I doubted we'd meet again. *Whatever.*

Then Yukinoshita's mom turned back to Haruno and Hayama. "Then shall we get going?"

"Okay!" Haruno stood, and Hayama followed, the order slip in hand.

But Yukinoshita, seated in front of me, didn't move.

Yukinoshita's mom noticed and asked in a peaceful voice, "Yukino, you're coming, too, aren't you?"

It was both a question and not one at all. There were a number of implications in that short sentence.

"I…"

When Yukinoshita trailed off, her mother added entreatingly, "This is also your birthday party."

Her gaze was warm and affectionate, her tone kindly remonstrating. But there was a force to it that wouldn't let you say no.

"…" Yukinoshita bit her lip, looking down, and then her gaze flicked over at me.

Hey, don't look at me…

Haruno spotted it. "Don't, Yukino-chan," she chided with a savage smile. Gleeful emotion wavered in her cold eyes, and Yukinoshita's shoulders twitched.

A silence went on for a while.

Haruno continued to stare at Yukinoshita, and Hayama looked at the both of them with concern. Yukinoshita was shrinking away like she had nowhere to go. I let my gaze escape out the window,

breathing a faint sigh that I made sure nobody would notice.

No words were exchanged in the meanwhile, as I passed an uncomfortable time.

And I wasn't the only one.

Yuigahama, too. And Yukinoshita.

Or maybe everyone there was feeling it.

Yukinoshita's mother tilted her head as if at a loss, putting her hand to her temple. Then she glanced over at me. "Oh, I know. Why don't your friends come with us?" She smiled brightly at me and Yuigahama.

"I'm sorry, I can't stay too long…" With that, I stood. Our attending a dinner that was only for family would just be awkward.

Most of all, I'm not so blind to social signals that I would overlook such a straightforward one.

"I see. I thought it would be nice if you could, but…," she said, though of course it seemed she had no intention of stopping me.

"…See you later, then."

"P-pardon us!" Yuigahama bobbed her head in a bow, and I gave a little nod myself as I stood from my seat. Hayama offered a casual farewell, and Haruno fluttered her hand with a wave and a smile.

And then, when Yukinoshita stood up after us, her gaze slid over to her mother. Her mother drew her jaw back slightly, responding with a nod.

Yukinoshita followed us to the front of the store to say goodbye, then looked down at the ground. "…I'm sorry for making things uncomfortable for you," she said.

Yuigahama waved her hands emphatically. "Not at all! I'm actually glad I got to see your mom!"

"I see. As long as you don't mind…," Yukinoshita replied, lifting her chin, but her expression remained dark.

Yuigahama's face clouded a bit, too, but she immediately started rustling around in the bag she held under her arm like she'd just thought of something. "Oh yeah, and here. It's a little early, but tomorrow's your birthday, so—" Yuigahama handed the bag with Yukinoshita's present over to her.

If she was giving her present, then I should be able to give her mine, then, too. "Happy b-day."

"Th-thank you…" Yukinoshita froze, staring at the bag for a while, taken aback, but she finally managed to stammer a reply.

Then she squeezed the bag to her chest, her face breaking into a smile.

At Yukinoshita's reaction, a smile slid onto Yuigahama's face, too. "Let's have a proper party at school!"

"See you, then," I said.

"Yes…see you."

We said our farewells to Yukinoshita, who did a little wave with a half-opened hand, and then we headed for the elevator.

I pressed the down button, but there was a bit of a wait before it came to our floor.

As we waited, Yuigahama breathed a deeply emotive *phew*. "So that was Yukinon's mom, huh? They really are alike."

"…Yeah."

It was true that Yukinoshita resembled her mother. At least superficially, in their appearance and air. But in terms of the sense I got from her, she was more like Haruno. I got the feeling I kind of understood what Haruno had said about their mother before.

"…But she's kinda…," Yuigahama began, as if waffling over whether to say it or not, but then there was a *ding*, and the elevator opened.

The both of us got in, and after pressing the button for the first floor, Yuigahama once again opened her mouth but most likely to say something different. "But, like, Hayato and Yukinon actually are childhood friends, huh? I had basically heard they'd known each other for a long time, but…"

"*Actually?* It's not like they were lying."

"Yeah, but, like…you don't really get that impression, right? If they've known each other for a long time, they could at least talk a little."

"Everyone has their stuff. You're not necessarily going to talk just because you go to the same school."

"Hmm, well, I guess."

The past is an inviolable territory open only for those it belongs to. I'm sure it's not only beautiful and warm things, either, but includes ugly and cold memories, too.

A shared past creates a wider gulf when that link is severed. Building up something together is totally different from building your own thing alone. Even if what they built is the same height, their peaks are different, and they'll rise to different summits. That difference will change many things—position, environment, and

even how you address someone.

The elevator kept moving without any stops.

In the silence, all that came to our ears was the low sound of the cable carrying us down. Its slight vibrations made the floor at our feet sway.

Down, down, oh so quietly, it sank deeper and deeper.

I was just a little scared to see what would appear beyond the opening doors when it stopped, and we arrived.

3

At some point, **Iroha Isshiki** started hanging around.

Three days later, the bustle of the three-day New Year's holiday had completely evaporated.

Once work started, my parents, who been lying around before, immediately went back to their usual hectic lives, and Komachi finally got serious about exams.

That meant at home, me and Kamakura were left with nothing to do, spending our days in idleness and ease.

But the gentle passage of time doesn't necessarily indicate peace of the heart. You get the most uneasy when you're not doing anything. When you're busy, you get so focused on what's in front of you, distractions disappear. But when you have time to spare, you wind up thinking about your shiftless future. Which makes you depressed. *Aghhh, I really don't wanna go to school, and I don't wanna get a job…*

During the limited time of winter vacation in particular, it's easy to let such thoughts have free rein.

That unfilled, unproductive time reminds you of the end that will eventually come. You can feel in your bones that this peace will not last long.

Seeing the end so clearly places such a heavy mental burden on you when you're just aimlessly wasting away your time. I wonder if this is how a NEET feels when he suddenly notices his parents are getting old after he's been sponging off them for so long… While patting the tummy fur of the cat inside the *kotatsu*, I pondered such thoughts.

But the truly strong are those who overcome such a burden. The true unemployed. They say *I'm gonna get serious now* for the first time only after being forced to the brink: the unemployed and light-novel authors. From the above, you can say that unemployed

equals light-novel author. QED, proof complete. Or possibly *Spiral: The Bonds of Reasoning*.

I was absorbed in my own internal monologue, and before I knew it, it was the End of Vacation.

School was starting again that day.

But since my lifestyle rhythm had gone all out of whack, it was a flurried morning for me.

I washed my face and roughly smoothed down the wilder bits of my hair and looked in the mirror. The crisp morning air and the coldness of the water chased my sleepiness away.

Okay… I'll make it through today, too.

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The classroom after winter break was filled with commotion.

As everyone was greeting each other with "Long time no see" or "Happy New Year," they seemed somehow restless. They probably had plenty of new things to talk about over the holidays. Everyone was chattering loudly, filled with more energy than usual. Maybe they were excited from the unique atmosphere of meeting each other after a break and the new year and the new semester.

But I don't think that was the only reason.

It was probably partly because that morning in short homeroom, a piece of paper had been handed out.

Ignoring what the homeroom teacher was saying, I stared at that paper. On it was written *Postsecondary selection questionnaire*. They'd done this many times before, but this was apparently the last one of our second year. Our final decision to take arts or sciences in third year would be based on our answers.

This would make high school second-years aware that this time would come to an end, whether they liked it or not.

It was a new year, and there weren't many days left to spend together with this class. Bit by bit, as the year passed, I felt like time was flowing faster. And I'm sure I wasn't the only one.

A week passed into January, and there wasn't much of the school year left. There were less than three months remaining to spend in this class.

Already, the big school events were over, and the schooltime after January tended to feel like a throwaway match. There were no

goals to head toward and no events to bring people together. Accordingly, their attention was diverted to those around them with whom they were close, leading to this hubbub.

What's more, in third year, you don't come to school after January, in order to prepare for entrance exams. This would functionally be the last winter of our time in high school.

Unfilled, unproductive time will make you think about the end that will eventually come. We instinctively sensed that this gentle time would not go on much longer.

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Even at the end of the school day, the excited atmosphere didn't change.

The others in the class must not have gotten enough chatting done, as many still remained. Among those who stayed behind, the ones who stood out the most were the usual crew, with Hayato Hayama and Yumiko Miura in the middle of the group.

Tobe, Ooka, and Yamato were continuing to have their dumb conversations, while Hayama was seated by the window, leaning his cheek on his hand as he looked outside. Occasionally, he seemed to remember to make appropriate listening noises in response to their conversation, a slight smile on his face.

Beside them, Miura's trio seemed to be having a different conversation.

As usual, the queen was twirling a lock of golden hair around her fingertip as she sank into the back of her chair. She was staring at the career path questionnaire she held in her other hand.

"What're you gonna do, Yui?" she asked Yuigahama, who was sitting diagonally from her, with a wave of the paper.

"I think…I'm probably going for arts."

"Huh. And you, Ebina?"

"Me too," Ebina, who was sitting across from Miura, replied as she pushed up her glasses. What about you, Yumiko?"

"I'm…still thinking about it," Miura answered, then flicked her gaze over to the side.

There was Hayama and his group.

Watching them, Miura paused in thought, then called out, "… Tobe, what about you?"

Suddenly having his name called, Tobe turned around and tilted his head like, *What's this about?* But then he saw the paper in Miura's hand. "Ohhh, the survey, huh?" said Tobe. "Well, I haven't made up my mind yet, but I'm bad at memorization. So maybe I'll go for sciences."

"What?"

"Whoa, didn't expect that."

Miura tilted her head in extreme derision, while Yuigahama was surprised.

Well, that was quite unexpected. I really doubted Tobe was the type who could manage science subjects. It seemed I wasn't the only one who thought that. Next to him, Ooka and Yamato also checked his sanity.

"Dude, sciences? Are you for real?"

"Calm down, man."

Not even Tobe was immune to everyone ganging up on him. With a pout of his lips, he argued back. "I mean, I got no choice. There's no way I can memorize all that English vocab."

Come on, you need English for both arts and sciences…

Ooka and Yamato must have been relieved to discover Tobe hadn't made this decision based on any deep consideration, as they slung their arms around his shoulders and whispered into his ear.

"Come do arts with us, eh? C'mon."

"Getting science credit in university is hard."

"Yeah, yeah, Yamato's right. College is a cinch when you're going for an arts degree. Let's hang out tons, huh? School is your only shot at having a good time in life, so you've got to think about your future!"

It seemed that in making choices about their future, neither Ooka nor Yamato was going on to university to further their studies; instead, they considered secondary education a moratorium until they had to get a job. But, like, is this what they mean when they say *Thinking about your future*?

Often, once people of this type do get jobs, the default is to smugly start lecturing young people, like, *I think I shoulda studied harder when I was in school, y'know?*

Fwa-ha-ha! Those types deserve to suffer in their job hunting! They should go rush to climb Mount Fuji or go to India to discover themselves so they can have a story for interviews right before it becomes time to search for a job. Meanwhile, as for me, I have no

intention of getting a job in the first place, so there is a possibility my soul is of a lower grade than theirs.

But against Tobe, their arguments are super effective!

"Ah, you got a point. Whoa, thanks, guys."

Tobe was instantly sucked in. Tobe's chances of future success have fainted! Or at least they're fainter than before.

But it seemed even Tobe felt a little uneasy about the issue of his future, as he asked the others, "So what're all you guys going for?"

"Me and Hina will probably be arts. And Yumiko's still thinking," said Yuigahama.

Tobe swished up the hair on the back of his neck, then glanced over to see how Ebina was looking. "For real? Maybe I'll go for arts, too."

"But they say sciences gives you the advantage with job searching, don't they? I think the sciences are nice. Putting elements together…seeing what has chemistry…y'know?" Though Ebina started off sounding serious, by the end, her usual *fujoshi* leer was rearing its head.

"…Ah, ahhh, I gotcha," said Tobe. "F-for sure, huh? Yeah, totally."

Totally not. But though Tobe was a little weirded out, he was nodding along. It seemed Ebina's defensive walls were strong, as usual.

What was different from usual was the way the others reacted. The one who would usually be smacking Ebina on the head now to put a halt to her madness was not functioning that day. Ebina must have found this strange, as her gaze jumped over to Miura.

Miura didn't look like she was listening to their conversation—she was zoning out, staring at Hayama.

"…And you, Hayato?" she asked him, who had been silently watching the conversation from the side.

Hayama shrugged a little and smiled wryly. "I've…basically decided."

"Hmm…" Though Miura's reply sounded apathetic, her eyes never left him. Her face said she still wanted to ask something, despite her attempts to pretend she didn't. But Hayama smiled, as if to say this conversation was over, and Miura couldn't ask any further. The question went unsaid.

When the conversation between the two of them trailed off,

Tobe cut between them. “Hey, you’re not gonna tell us which you picked, Hayato? I dunno what to pick anymore.”

“What are you asking me for? This is your life, so you have to really think about it. You don’t want to leave with regrets.”

Hayama was right.

I’m not going to spout any egocentric pseudo-kindness like *You should decide your own life yourself*. But if you base your answers on what someone else comes up with, you’re going to blame them when it goes south. You’ll get desperate to find the war criminal in your life. You’re the one who decided to go along with someone else’s decision, but you’ll feel resentful toward that person. If you’re making compromises like that and lying to yourself, you’re just insincere.

Tobe was like “Whaaa!” and “Yaaaagh!” and “Wahaaa!” at Hayato’s lecture, but he did seem convinced.

“Aw, guess I hafta think about it,” he grumbled, and the others nodded, too, and it seemed the subject was now over.

With nothing else to say on that shared subject, they went silent for a while.

Possibly in an attempt to be helpful, Ooka seemed to remember something and said to Hayama, “Oh yeah, so, Hayato, is it true you and Yukinoshita are dating?”

“What?”

Everyone there, Miura first on that list, dropped their jaws in shock. Mine, too, possibly. *What the hell is Ooka saying? There’s no way that would be true, I think… Right? No, no way…*

No one saw that one coming, and time stopped for everyone.

But time has begun to move again.

“WHAAAAAT?!”

Loudly shoving her chair back, Miura bounded to her feet.

The chatter in the classroom disappeared into an oppressive silence, and everyone in the class looked over to see what was going on.

With everyone’s eyes gathering on them, Hayama shot Ooka a piercing look. “Who said that? You can’t just go around telling people that.”

His voice was strained but sharp.

Taken aback by Hayama’s markedly different attitude, Ooka couldn’t say a thing. But Hayama’s eyes wouldn’t let him fall silent.

I’d seen a look like that on Hayama once before. I recall it was

in late autumn, that time we'd been with Orimoto and her friend.

Overwhelmed by the unrelenting, intense flash of Hayama's eyes, Ooka hesitantly answered his question. "Uh, who? It's just a rumor… I heard someone saw you together in Chiba during winter vacation…," he managed to reply.

Hayama expelled a tiny sigh, and then his eyes relaxed, and the corners of his mouth turned up. "Oh, is that it? Sorry to rain on the parade, but we were just together because of family business. And it obviously would never happen. Right, Tobe?" Addressing Tobe brightly, Hayama had his usual smile on as he lightly whacked Ooka on the shoulder.

"Uh…uh-huh, yeah! For sure!"

"Right?"

As Hayama gave a mildly self-deprecating smile, Ooka and Yamato both agreed.

"Y-yeah, duh! Man, I figured it wasn't true, though."

"Then don't say it." Hayama jokingly jabbed Ooka in the head. Their exchange was very typical of guys fooling around together. Ooka reacted dramatically to the head poke, and gradually, the atmosphere in the classroom relaxed, too.

Picking up his bag, Hayama stood. "We should get going to club. I'm going to go to the teacher's room and submit my survey, then go."

"Gotcha."

"Then we might as well go, too."

With everyone voicing their agreement, Tobe stood, and Ooka and Yamato followed. They casually waved at the girls and said "See ya" as they walked off.

As Hayama and the guys left, Miura watched in silence. She was biting her lip silently, her finger still with her long hair wrapped around it.

Yuigahama gently laid a hand on her shoulder. "It's okay! I was with them that day, too."

"For serious?" Miura asked uneasily, and Yuigahama grinned at her.

"Yeah, I was going shopping that day, and then I ran into Yukinon and her sister, and Yukinon's and Hayato's families know one another, so they were doing New Year's greetings stuff. And Yukinon was invited to that, too."

That's a terrible explanation… It's like listening to a little kid tell a

story…

Nodding along at her sloppy explanation, Ebina summarized. “Okay, so you’re saying that someone just happened to see them when they were meeting for family business, then that turned into a rumor, huh?”

“Yeah, I think.”

“Hayato and Yukinoshita are hard to ignore, so I think they tend to leave an impression.”

When the conversation reached that point, I stood from my seat and left the classroom.

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The after-school bustle was in the hallways, too.

Winter vacation had just ended, and there was still kind of a sense of restlessness in the school. There were even students coming and going along the hallway to the special-use building, which was usually fairly empty.

“Did you hear? About Hayama.”

“Oh, that, huh? It sounds like maybe it’s real, right?”

I passed by some girls who were showcasing the freshly stocked rumor.

Most likely, as Ebina had said in the classroom, fragments of information had been gathered together, producing a trend toward speculation and jokes for people to entertain themselves with and spread to others.

Though it wasn’t like the subject had anything to do with me, every time I heard something, a shiver of discomfort creeped up on me. I wanted to cringe into myself.

I think the actual name for this discomfort was disgust toward a bunch of essentially randos casually rumormongering.

The most grating thing about this rumor was that malice wasn’t even necessarily involved.

It was just interesting. Because everyone is curious. Because it’s about two people who usually attract attention. So you can talk how you want about them. Nobody questions that explanation, so the topic becomes popular. They don’t care if it’s wrong; they won’t take the responsibility to ensure they aren’t spreading false information. And if it adversely affects someone, you can say *It’s*

just a rumor and absolve yourself. Even though people will normally try to draw attention to themselves, they feel no reserve about saying they're one of the many nameless common citizens when it serves their convenience.

It's really disgusting. I'd much rather hear gossip about myself than this.

As I was reflecting, I heard a pattering of footsteps come following after me. Yuigahama was the only one who would walk in such a lively way. I slowed down a bit, and she quickly caught up.

Coming up by my side, Yuigahama gave me a whip with her bag. "Why're you going without me?"

"Uh, you were kinda still talking…" *And I don't even remember ever promising to go with her in the first place…* Well, back in December, I had promised to go with her to the clubroom. Apparently to her, that trend was still ongoing.

"Hey, so did you overhear what we were just talking about? About Yukinon and Hayato."

"Well, when you're that loud about it…" Not only were they a group that stood out, Miura had yelled, too… I figured everyone still in the classroom had seen that. "Well, the rumors are just rumors. It'd never happen."

"I figured as much, too, but…" There, Yuigahama trailed off for a moment, but then she immediately lifted her head. "But I kinda thought maybe, one day, that might actually happen with Yukinon and Hayato."

I tried imagining it, but I couldn't quite bring it into focus. Of course, I couldn't see that for Yukinoshita, but I also couldn't imagine Hayama having a romantic relationship with a specific person.

And those thoughts on the matter rolled right out of me. "Honestly, I can't imagine it…Yukinoshita dating someone."

"…Why not?"

"Why not…?"

I couldn't have her giving me that curious look. I mean, the reason was obvious.

"With Yukinoshita, I mean, can she even get along with someone…?" I said.

Yuigahama scrunched up her face. "Mgh. Ahhh, yeah, well, uh. That's, um, well."

"Right?"

“Hmm… Ah! No, no, no, that’s not what I wanted to ask! But I can’t argue that…” Yuigahama continued to groan, holding her head, but we’d already come to the dead end in the hallway. We were right in front of the clubroom.

Before putting my hand on the door, I cleared my throat, lowered my voice, and said, “Anyway, don’t talk about this in the clubroom.”

“Huh? Why not?”

“… ’Cause she’ll get mad.”

“…You’re right!”

As expected of someone who’s been hanging out with her for nearly a year. She could imagine what would get Yukinoshita mad. If Yukinoshita discovered that she was the subject of irresponsible rumors, she’d get pissed, no question.

Before entering the clubroom, we looked at each other and nodded, then opened the door for the first time in a long while.

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The heat was already on inside the clubroom, and I sat down in my usual seat with a sigh of relief.

Placed on top of the desk in front of me was a whole small cake, divided into four equal slices, that had been cheerfully set out by Yuigahama.

“Happy birthday, Yukinon!”

“Happy b-day.”

“Happy birthday.”

Yukinoshita twisted around uncomfortably at the celebratory words from all of us. “Th-thanks… Um, perhaps there should be tea,” she said, then hopped out of her chair and began energetically preparing some.

As the sound of tableware clinking rang through the room, I heard an appreciative “Ohhh” from beside me. “So January third was your birthday, Yukinoshita? Oh, and by the way, mine is April sixteenth.” The speaker turned to me.

“I didn’t ask…” *Why is she even here in the first place…?*

She tilted her head cutely, making her golden hair sway. Underneath her slightly less-than-standard uniform was a cardigan with overlong sleeves, while in one small hand, she grasped a fork

that was pressed against her lips hungrily.

Iroha Isshiki was in the Service Club room as if she belonged there.

She got a quarter of the cake, and she'd even accepted a paper cup with tea. Her adaptational ability is so high. Is she a member of Tokio? Bet she could survive on a desert island…

Isshiki sipped her tea, the slightly overlong sleeves of her cardigan stroking the paper cup in her hand. "Heyyy, invite me to go to the shrine with you, toooo."

"Why would I have to invite you?" I snapped back. Like, how would I have even invited her anyway? Does she mean to communicate telepathically? Is that a special deal with no charge for the call? Or is it, like, a strategy to place herself in a superior psychological position by using this to make me ask her number? Too bad! I won't fall for that! Hachiman knows that reading in too deep will be digging a grave for himself!

Or so I was thinking to myself, but it seemed Isshiki wasn't actually thinking that deeply about it and was looking off in the other direction as she sighed. "I mean, you guys all went to the shrine together, right? Meaning, Hayama was there, too."

"No, he wasn't with us…"

"Oh, of course. So then it's fine, actually," Isshiki said, then turned away and cut the conversation off right there. *Iroha ga Kill!* Cut down in one neat stroke… The only ones I can think of who will end things so sharply are anime viewers or the *hitokiri battousai*.

Well, it's not like I didn't get Isshiki's feelings. Miura's trio had been there at the shrine, so I could understand the idea that maybe Hayama would be, too. What I couldn't understand was why Isshiki was here in the clubroom.

"So why are you here?" I asked her.

"Huh? I mean, there's nothing for the student council to do at this time of year."

"I'm sure there's plenty to do. Not like I know much about it. And, like, go to your club, then. You're still their manager, aren't you?" I said.

Isshiki gave my shoulder a little pat. "Come on; it's fine, it's fine! Oh yeah. I came to get the things I left here during Christmas."

"You clearly only thought of that just now." *Wow, I hope she didn't pull a muscle with that reach.*

"Agh…," Yukinoshita sighed, and beside her, Yuigahama had a

strained smile.

Good grief, Irohasu… It was like a roomful of exasperated Charlie Browns, but Isshiki seemed totally unmoved by this. I feel like she'd make a really stable storefront decoration, you know, like one of those Keroyon frog statues they stand up in front of pharmacies.

Even Isshiki seemed to feel uncomfortable with everyone staring at her, as she evaded our looks by blowing on her not-very-hot-looking tea.

"Oh, that reminds me," she abruptly said, looking over at Yukinoshita. Yukinoshita responded with a tilt of her head, and Isshiki smiled brightly and said the unthinkable.

"Yukinoshita, you're dating Hayama?"

"Pardon?" Yukinoshita's head tipped over even further until it was practically at a right angle.

Ah man, why does she just go calmly walking out onto a minefield like that…? What is with this hurt locker…? What's more, she didn't even give Yukinoshita a moment of warning. It reminds me of a great pitcher of years gone by who was known at his peak to throw blazing fastballs with no tells.

Thing is, this was Isshiki we're talking about. I'm positive she was asking this with deliberate intent. I bet the reason she came to the clubroom in the first place was to find out if the rumors were true.

"Isshiki…," Yukinoshita said to her, tone cold. Her mild smile seemed to be enveloped by a faint, aurora-like veil, but behind it were clear and crisp eyes, as if carved of ice from the North Pole.

Isshiki trembled before it. "Y-yes?!" she replied in a tiny voice, her body bent back to hide behind me.

Hey, don't use me as a shield.

Yukinoshita's discerning eyes shot through Isshiki as she came out from behind my shoulder. "…Of course not," Yukinoshita said flatly.

Isshiki nod-nodded back at her. "O-of course not! Oh, I was thinking that there was no way, you know! But once you hear a rumor like that, you gotta know!"

"Rumors?" Yukinoshita pounced on that word, gaze shifting over to me and Yuigahama.

"Oh, well," I said, "there are a few people sort of talking about it…"

“We were all together a little while ago, right? It seems like someone saw and got the wrong idea,” Yuigahama said.

Yukinoshita sighed deeply, clearly done with all of it. “I see. This is why they say awful people see awful things everywhere, hmm…?”

Well, to teenagers, there’s no topic as entertaining as who has a crush on whom. And if it’s about people who stand out as much as Hayama and Yukinoshita, you’ll get suspicions.

Isshiki had a crush on Hayama, so of course she’d come check if the rumors were true. I looked over to see Isshiki tilting her head pensively.

“Man, that could be trouble.”

“Yes, indeed,” Yukinoshita agreed. “Especially for us.”

“Oh, no, that’s not what I mean,” Isshiki corrected her, sounding a bit hesitant, making Yukinoshita tilt her head.

“What do you mean?” Yukinoshita asked.

Isshiki stuck up a finger. “There’s never been any rumors about Hayama before that were this specific, weirdly enough.”

“Oh, you’re right…” This must have struck a chord in Yuigahama’s memory, as she looked up at the ceiling as she answered that.

Now that she mentions it, I don’t think I’ve ever heard anything before about Hayama being involved romantically with anyone. Oh well. Not that I would have heard about any romances to begin with. No one would ever tell me about that stuff… This was something I could only have suspicions about, just as Yukinoshita had said earlier. About the only other thing I could do is consult a Ouija board.

“Seems to me all the girls are pretty interested in that rumor.” Isshiki folded her arms and *hmm*’d.

The heretofore single and unattached Hayato Hayama was dating someone—of course, this was Hayama. That should have come as no surprise. The girls with crushes on him must have had some latent anxieties about it, too, so these rumors had made those anxieties suddenly manifest. How could that change the relationships that surrounded him?

“…Rumors, hmm. How unfortunate,” Yukinoshita muttered. The remark didn’t seem to be directed at anyone, as ripples spread just slightly in the cup under her gaze.

“Well, look!” said Yuigahama. “I think if you ignore them,

they'll go away soon enough! They say rumors last forty-nine days, right?"

"It's seventy-five," I corrected her. *Did someone die? Has there been a funeral service recently?*

"Anyway! Let's just not pay attention to them," Yuigahama said, attempting to make Yukinoshita feel better.

It was true that all we could do now was keep our mouths shut. There's no use arguing against people who spread rumors based on lies and half-truths for their own entertainment. You have no choice but to hunker down and tighten up like a clam. Before malicious misunderstandings and the tides of amusement, the only countermeasure is silence.

If you freak out and start yelling back, people will eagerly nitpick what you say. Their only goal is entertainment, so they can use anything as material for attack. What's more, if you defend the person getting bashed, then this time, you'll be the one getting slapped with damage. Like rock-paper-scissors, no matter what move you play, you're going to wind up the only one losing. You might get called out if you do nothing, but doing nothing will still get you the least damage.

It seemed Yukinoshita understood this, as she gave a small nod. "…All right."

"Then moving on… Back to work again!" Yuigahama said with cheer, and in response, Yukinoshita smiled and pulled out the laptop.

Back to work… Not what I like to hear.

X X X

No matter how much I didn't like it, I had to work. In fact, it's not wanting to do it that makes it work. And what I didn't like was checking the first work e-mails of the new year.

To start checking the long-unattended Chiba Prefecture–Wide Advice E-mail, Yukinoshita pulled out the dust-covered laptop from the corner of the room.

This laptop, which Miss Hiratsuka had procured from somewhere or other, was an old model that took some time to boot up.

While we were waiting for it, Yukinoshita started rummaging

around in her bag. Then she cheerfully pulled out a glasses case and slipped on the lenses inside without a word.

Her gaze met mine, and I automatically faked a yawn and looked away. In the corner of my eye, I could see Yukinoshita lowering her face.

"Oh, those look great on you, Yukinon!" said Yuigahama.

"D-do they?" With a touch on the frames, Yukinoshita glanced over at me.

"…Well, I guess." It was really awkward to see the present I'd given her being used in front of me, so that was all I could manage.

"…Thank you," she replied quietly, then turned away as if disinterested. I nodded back without a word, taking a sip of my tea instead.

Isshiki watched this scene curiously. "Did you always wear glasses, Yukinoshita?"

"…They're a blue-light filter," Yukinoshita mumbled somewhat reluctantly, never looking away from the computer screen.

But Isshiki didn't actually care; she just stroked her paper cup as she carelessly said, "Uh-huh."

Wow, she really doesn't give a damn…

But right now, I was grateful for that disinterest.

If that discussion were to go any further, then I would have started squirming in actual mortified agony. My leg was already bouncing, and I couldn't look at anything for longer than half a second.

When I adjusted the position of my chair, feeling strangely antsy, Yuigahama muttered, "Maybe I'll try wearing glasses like that, too…"

"Uh, you never look at the computer, though," I said.

Yuigahama huffed at me with indignation. "Yeah, but…no, wait; yes, I do! I look at the computer tons! Yukinon, show me, too!" With a scrape of her chair, Yuigahama moved up beside Yukinoshita to peer at the computer. "Oh, we got an e-mail."

"Yes, I think it's from Miura," Yukinoshita said and spun the computer around to face me.

Request for advice from alias yumiko ☆:
How do you guys make the choice for arts or sciences?

Ahhh. It's true; this looks like a message from Miura. I remember she sent one before with a username like this.

Perhaps because the screen was pointed at me, Isshiki also came circling around behind me, cake plate in hand, to get a better look. "Hmm, this is about course streams? Which is actually better?" she asked, touching her fork to her mouth as she munched the cake and looked at the ceiling.

This was a question any high school student thinking about university entrance exams would consider once. It seemed Isshiki was no exception.

"Well, if we're just talking purely about entrance exams, arts is way easier, although private and public are totally different. For national public universities, you have to study seven subjects, but for arts and humanities, you're fine with just English, Japanese, and social studies." I offered my personal opinion.

Isshiki shifted a step away from me. "…Eugh. Wait, do you actually get decent grades?"

"What do you mean, *actually*…? …Huh? Did you just say 'eugh'? Just what do you take me for…"

Isshiki gave me a radiant grin, as if this were the greatest thing ever. "Oh, I can't say that… Look, I'm bad at insulting people, okay?"

I don't care, and that was basically an insult… What is with this girl…? I thought as I eyed her.

Isshiki looked back at me like she was impressed. "I knew you were probably kinda smart, but I didn't know you actually got good grades and stuff."

Hmm, is that what it is, Iroha-chan? You just can't stand the idea that I'm smart? Your choice of words sounds a little stubborn, you know?

"Yeah! That's right, Hikki gets good grades in the humanities." Yuigahama clapped her hands in agreement, puffing out her chest with a smug *hmph*.

Why are you proud of that…? And please don't just emphasize humanities.

Yukinoshita, beside her, swished her hair off her shoulders and smiled boldly. "It's true; he does get fairly decent grades. But he can't get the number one spot."

Why are you proud of that…? No, that makes sense. Her grades *are* ranked above mine…

Isshiki listened to our exchange, nodding. “So then that means you’re going for arts?”

“Yeah,” I answered, and Isshiki once again answered with that completely uninvested *uh-huh. So…don’t ask?*

And then, as if getting to the real issue at hand here, she cleared her throat. “…So has Hayama already made up his mind?”

“Ahhh, it looks like Hayato’s already decided,” Yuigahama said as she thought back.

That got Isshiki going. “Huh? Wait—wait—wait for real? Which one?! I need to know—for reference, I mean. Just to know. For the future.”

“Hmm, I don’t quite know what he wrote… Just that he’s already submitted his course stream survey…”

“Ohhh, I see.” Isshiki’s shoulders dropped in visible dejection.

Yuigahama must have felt bad for her. “Oh, but if it’s for reference, I know about Tobecchi!” she offered.

“No, I don’t care about Tobe.”

“That was fast!!”

Reference for what…? I was thinking, exasperated, when Yukinoshita gave the computer screen a dubious look, letting out a short sigh.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Oh, nothing. I was just a little surprised to hear Miura worries about anything.”

“That’s pretty mean… I mean, even with her personality. She may think she’s the queen, but even a queen’s got problems.”

“You’re being even meaner… And I didn’t mean it in that way.” Putting a finger to her temple, Yukinoshita sighed in exasperation and continued, “I was just surprised that someone like her would have trouble choosing. She always seems so decisive. Even Tobe has decided on a course stream…”

Was that last remark necessary…? It’s kind of like he got in a car accident that wasn’t his fault… I smirked, and Yuigahama smiled back awkwardly.

“Ah-ha-ha…even Yumiko will worry about that stuff. I mean, it’s your future education.”

“Why is that so hard, though?” I said. If there’s something you want to do, then make a selection that aligns with that. If there’s nothing in particular you want, then just go to university. Isn’t that how most high school students out there think?

The decision between arts and sciences is at most just related to subjects on the entrance exam or selecting a target university. I'm sure some people might consider university-level credit, or the difficulty of getting a certain qualification, or advantages and disadvantages when job hunting, but basically, if you think about it and knock out what you don't want to do, the answer will come out on its own.

It's not that easy for people to find what they want to do, but they can instantly tell you what they don't.

Yuigahama responded to my statement with a dubious look. "Hmm, that's not what I mean… Look, everyone is gonna wind up in different places, right? Thinking about all that makes it hard to decide."

"Well, I guess… But that's just how it is." I think it's taken for granted that somewhere, sometime, the end will come. And that's even more obvious with high school, which only lasts so many years. I understand that our paths beyond that would branch off in different directions.

So that was all I could say.

Yuigahama's shoulders slumped a bit. "Yeah, that's true, but… I dunno, it's like, the things we're doing and the places we're aiming for are all different… And when we're split into arts and sciences, we can't be in the same classes…"

"If that's your point, then I've been in a separate class this whole time. I'm in a completely different program…," Yukinoshita said quietly, face turned away. It was hard to tell, but it looked like she was sulking. The International Curriculum, which Yukinoshita was in, was different from our regular curriculum. There was only one class to begin with, so they'd be together for all three years.

"S-sorry, Yukinon! That's not what I meant to say… I—I don't really get what I'm saying anymore, but it's totally okay even if we're in different classes!" Yuigahama grabbed on to Yukinoshita and clung. Hmm. How beautiful it is to have good friends. Gahama and Yukinon really are besties!

Suspicious, Isshiki suddenly looked up. "Ohhh, I get it."

"What?" I asked.

Isshiki gave an elated chuckle and pointed to the laptop. "The one who sent this is Miura, right? So isn't Hayama's course stream what she wants to know? The classes for next year will be decided based on that, after all."

Oh-ho, so such a brief e-mail contained such complex intentions. Translating sentences from girlese is so difficult. If this were a mandatory course, you'd get people dropping the credit one after another. And yet when you translate sentences of boyese into Japanese, just about all of it means "I want to get girls." It's incredibly easy to understand.

Thanks to our girlese interpreter, Iroha Isshiki, I now knew what the e-mail meant, but there was still one thing here that didn't make sense to me.

"But would Miura beat around the bush like that? I know *you* might, Isshiki."

"Come on, what kind of person do you think I am…?" Isshiki seemed miffed.

Uh, you literally just used me as a dupe so you could ask about Hayama's course stream choice, though…

But I guess another girl would get more out of what she was saying, as Yuigahama fell into thought with a *hmm*. By the way, she still had her arms around our dear Miss Yukinoshita, who was totally at her mercy. "I see… In the classroom before, she seemed worried about it, so maybe you're right… Yumiko can be pretty girlish, you know…"

"Yep! See! Like me?" Isshiki nodded and looked for agreement from me.

Hmm… Girlish *isn't a word I would use for Miura or Isshiki, though…* Miura in particular is less girlish and more like the leader of a gang of juvenile delinquents, one in Yokohama. Maybe because of her name?

But she was right. Miura had brought up the subject of course streams with the others after class. Yuigahama and Ebina were one thing, but I doubted Miura was interested in what Tobe picked. I mean, I sure wasn't.

So just as Isshiki had used me as a pretext to ask what Hayama was picking, Miura must have decided to do something similar to get information out of the one she really wanted to know about. But Hayama had refused for a truly Hayama-like reason…

And then she'd sent this e-mail to investigate the matter—and that's the story.

Just as Isshiki had said, if Miura wanted to be in the same class as Hayama the following year as well, then she'd have to choose the same course stream as him.

In previous years, the third-years had been made up into six classes, typically with three arts/humanities courses and three of science. Even choosing the same stream, it was up to luck if you'd be in the same classes, but still, if you chose a different stream, your chances were zilch.

On top of that, the arts and sciences classes were on different floors. Classes in the arts were on the second floor, and the science classes were on the first.

If you were farther away from each other, there would be fewer opportunities to spend time together. To a young maiden in love, this would be a matter of life and death.

"But then shouldn't she ask him herself?" Yukinoshita asked as she firmly pried Yuigahama off her. Even in winter, staying so long in someone's embrace would be stifling. The way Yukinoshita pushed away her arms reminded me of a cat that was sick of being held.

"The subject did come up when we were together in the classroom, but Hayato said, *You should think about it for yourself*, and wouldn't say…"

"Wasn't that juuust because everyone was there? She should just go for it when they're alone together. Like, she could catch his eye that way, too," Isshiki explained, wiggling her finger around in a small gesture.

"It's not that easy." *Sorry, Isshiki, but I'm sure it's not that simple.*

There are a lot of things you can't just ask, even if you think you're close.

The future, the present, the past—you don't know where land mines might be buried.

What if you ask anyway, and you get an answer you didn't want to hear? I bet sometimes just thinking about that will make the words stick in your throat.

When I sank into thought, Yukinoshita opened her mouth. "So what do we do about this request?"

"Well, we can just say we'll do it," I said. I really didn't want to interfere in other people's relationships, but this seemed like nothing more than support. Besides, if Hayama and Miura's relationship went back to normal operations, that would probably get rid of these dumb rumors, too.

"Okay! I'll try asking again tomorrow," said Yuigahama.

"Yes, that might be a good idea," said Yukinoshita. "Sorry, but

can I ask you to handle it?"

"Yeah!" Yuigahama answered energetically but then immediately added, expression glum, "But I don't know if he'll tell me…"

Well, if he hadn't been willing to tell Miura or Tobe and the guys in the classroom that day, then it was hard to imagine he'd tell Yuigahama. She would occupy the same category in his mind. Same for Isshiki.

Inferring from the way Hayama had spoken in the classroom, I think what he was worried about was that his influence would reduce options for the people he was close to.

Meaning someone from another category, someone who was not under his influence, would have to be the one to ask. There were a limited number of people who would qualify there.

I glanced over to Yukinoshita.

But she was tilting her head with a questioning look.

…Well, sending Yukinoshita to Hayama following the rise of those rumors would be a bad idea. The issue here wasn't whether he would tell her or not but that it would cause some other problems.

Looks like there's no one but me… But also, like, would my asking get us anywhere?

"Oh, well, guess I'll ask…," I said.

Yuigahama and Yukinoshita both looked at me with surprise.

"Huh? You, Hikki?"

"Will you be okay? Can you manage conversation?"

"That's not really the question here… But you're right that I don't feel great about it."

Still, we were both *native speakers*, as they say in English, so we should be able to manage conversation at least. Still, even if you can understand someone's words, you won't necessarily understand their heart. In fact, it's because you sort of use the same words that you won't be able to make the other person understand some things. Wait, maybe that's the wrong English. That's not *native*, that's *negative*.

"But, well, we may have *some* chance," I said.

"What do you mean?" asked Yukinoshita.

"If he can't tell people who are close to him, then we have to try the opposite. I bet there's some stuff he can tell me because we have nothing to do with each other."

"…I see. Like a confessional or a shriving."

"A shriving…" The word must have been unfamiliar to Yuigahama, as she opened her mouth vacantly and repeated the term.

Assuming we'll explain that to Yuigahama later… Yukinoshita's wording was a little dramatic, but it wasn't off the mark.

There are a lot of behaviors in daily life that are like going to a confessional. There's the middle-aged men who complain at the bar counter or at passing acquaintances at the *izakaya*, while some people will overshare on social media or forums to an unspecified number of people whose names and faces they don't know. It's the weakness of the relationship that enables you to talk to them. Well, in my case, it's impossible for me to talk to people I don't know, though I wouldn't want to anway.

"Anyway, I'll try asking. It won't cost me anything to try."

This is what corporate slaves call "pretending to be an idiot to ask something." They say this skill is vital for newbie corporate slaves when you've overheard information, and your ability or inability to do this will greatly affect the way you do the job following that. Source: my dad, who was whining about new employees these days. Just thinking about having a superior like him kills any desire I might have to get a job. But I sense that I will acquire yet another useless corporate slave ability, regardless…

But there wasn't any other way. For the moment, our only shot was me.

Having decided on a plan, Isshiki breathed a short sigh and stood. "Okay, then I'm going to get back! Thank you for the tea, and, Yui, once you know, please tell me, 'kay?" she said. Bobbing her head in a bow, she made to leave the room.

I called out after her. "Hey, your stuff."

"Ah." Spinning around in place, Isshiki went *tee-hee* to cover her embarrassment, then walked to pick up the cardboard boxes piled up in the corner of the clubroom.

"Hup, here we go."

Carrying the cardboard boxes, Isshiki staggered around in an incredibly unsteady manner. Before I could second-guess myself, I reached out a hand to snatch a box from Isshiki's arms. My big brother skills activated on auto thanks to the training from Komachi. You can't remove this ability, can you…?

"Th-thank youuu! Soooo could I ask you to take that to the

student council room?”

“Yeah…”

Well, I was stuck now. I turned back around at the door to tell Yukinoshita and Yuigahama I was about to go, but both of them were frozen there, staring at the cardboard box.

“…”

“…”

Huh? Why so quiet?

“…Then I’m gonna go carry this off,” I said. Yukinoshita reacted with a twitch, and without saying a word, she began swiftly cleaning up the dishes. *Seriously, why aren’t you saying anything…?*

Once she was mostly done, she and Yuigahama looked at each other. “…Let’s call this a day, then, as well,” Yukinoshita said.

“Y-yeah! Then let’s all carry the boxes together!” Yuigahama answered, her chair sliding back with a scrape as she stood. She grabbed her backpack, then started bouncing out of the clubroom. Yukinoshita also slung her bag over her shoulder and stepped out quietly.

Isshiki watched them, slightly confused. “Um… I don’t need that much help, though…”

“…I’m going to lock the door, so could you leave the room?” Yukinoshita prompted Isshiki with a cold smile, making her scurry out of the clubroom.

“R-right!”

The deserted hallway felt much colder than it actually was.

It was actually completely dark outside, and only the hallway of the special-use building appeared as a dim glow.

Watching the other three walk ahead of me, I adjusted my grip on the cardboard box.

It was packed with a jumble of colorful ornaments that we had used for the Christmas event.

Though the box’s contents were disorganized, the weight of it was certain in my arms.

4

Yumiko Miura still wants to know anyway.

The school courtyard was cuttingly cold, and class was over for the day. A few days had passed since that e-mail had come, and the season was moving further toward the dead of winter.

When the sun was up, it was often sunny and warm, but after sunset, the temperature dropped all at once.

And the wind started blowing, too.

Our school is by the ocean, and there are no large buildings to break the wind, so the winter ocean breeze sweeps over everything. Plus, Chiba is the flattest prefecture in Japan. It's a really wide-open space. Yes, we're very open here, very comfortable. It's also a very cozy place where young people can flourish. The hell, this is like a recruitment ad for an exploitative corporate enterprise. Now it kinda makes sense why Chiba is a commuter town full of corporate slaves who work in Tokyo!

But when you've been living in Chiba prefecture for seventeen years, your body will unsurprisingly adapt to the cold wind. Thanks to this, I'm also used to getting coldly blasted by society.

A particularly strong wind blew through, and I tugged the collar of my coat closer together, looking over to the distant soccer club.

I was standing on the edge of the parking lot, right in the shadow of the special-use building, and waiting for the soccer club to finish their practice.

As we had discussed in the clubroom the other day, I was planning to ask about Hayama's course stream. I'd spent the past few days looking for the right moment but hadn't quite been able to get alone with him, so for lack of any better options, I'd decided to ambush him on his way back from practice.

But coming straight from the warm clubroom, I was really

feeling the cold.

I'd been keeping an eye on the soccer club from the window, and I only went out once they had started to clean up, but I was a little early. The guys were stretching.

As I waited for them, lightly stepping in place to shake off the cold, I felt a tug on my sleeve.

I turned around to see something like a fluffy cat plushie there, holding a can of coffee. "Here."

I looked up farther to see Yukinoshita offering me a MAX Coffee with her cat-paw mitten. *So she's using those gloves, huh…?*

"Oh, thanks." I accepted it with gratitude, and it was as pleasingly warm as the vending machines promised. Instead of using a chemical hand warmer, I rolled the can in my hands.

Behind her, Yuigahama was rubbing her hands together, and Yukinoshita was pressing her cat-paw mittens to her cheeks, too. The two of them had followed me to watch how things went, but Hayama wasn't coming yet.

I looked up at the sky, which was darkening as if diluted ink were sloshed over it, and opened my mouth. "…You guys can go home."

"But making you do everything…" Yuigahama trailed off with a *mgg*, then glanced over at Yukinoshita, seeking agreement from her. Yukinoshita nodded, too.

But I shook my head at her. "No, I think it'll be easier if I'm alone for this. Wouldn't it be hard for him to talk about it with you guys there, too? Not that I know." It was a bad idea for Yukinoshita to be approaching Hayama at a time like this, especially out here. I could easily imagine gossipy people going around spreading lies and half-truths. But I couldn't quite bring myself to say that to Yukinoshita, and so I wound up being rather vague about it.

Yukinoshita considered it awhile, hand on her chin, but then she looked up again. "I see… Well, that's true."

"Hmm, it'd be best if I asked, though," said Yuigahama.

"I'm sorry to leave it all to you, but…"

"No, it's fine. That's what happens when you have a job to do," I responded to the girls as they looked at me with concern.

Then Yukinoshita smiled as well. "That doesn't sound like you."

Indeed. I couldn't help but offer a mildly self-deprecating smile as I nodded.

Yuigahama seemed to reach a decision about the matter, as she

heaved up her pack on her back with a *hup*. “Then see you tomorrow.”

“Yeah, see you.” I waved casually to the pair as they walked to the front gates, then turned my gaze once again back toward the soccer club. They were finally leaving the field, heading for the clubroom.

Ah, crap. Oh yeah, they change in the clubroom, huh? Maybe they, like, shower or something. I’ve never been in a sports club, so I don’t really know about this stuff…

Oh well, guess I have to go over there. Bringing my MAX Coffee to my mouth for a sip, I leaned against the wall on the side of the new school building that was closest to the clubroom.

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Once the sun had fallen fully under the horizon, it felt even colder. But I still kept watching, waiting impatiently for them to come back.

It’s so cold, though… Even if this is work, why do I have to wait for Hayama? Can’t I avoid asking him directly and get this done by just interviewing his guardian spirit or something?

My spirit had long since broken. My body was ice, and my legs were sticks… Nobody was coming, and I was so alone, it kind of made me think a Reality Marble had activated…

But still, I got what I was waiting for. Gradually, the soccer club guys came shuffling out.

I couldn’t find Hayama among them, though. *Why isn’t he here…?*

When I came away from the wall and craned my neck around, one of the guys called out to me. With that brown hair and lighthearted cheer, I could tell from a distance it was Tobe.

“Huh? If it isn’t Hikitani. What’s up?” He gave me a friendly wave.

I responded with a casually raised hand. “Where’s Hayama?”

“Hayato? …Oh, he’s kinda in the middle of something right now,” Tobe said, but his eyes were wandering around. I followed his gaze, but I couldn’t find Hayama.

“He’s not here?”

“Oh, he’s not *gone*. I mean, he is basically here, y’know?”

Tobe was being vague. *Which is it? What a hassle…*

"If he's not here, then oh well… I'm headin' out."

I was a little grumpy to wind up with this when I'd waited such a long time, but if there was nothing to be gained here, then it'd be best to just go home now. The basics of gambling is to cut your losses. This also applies to the game of life. Seriously, man, my whole life is a trail of cut losses, y'know?

Saying good-bye to Tobe, I headed for the parking lot.

"…Ah!"

I got the feeling I'd heard Tobe's voice behind me, but I ignored it and continued ahead.

And then, in the shadow of the school building, I discovered Hayama. *Hey, he* is *here!* This wasn't the way to the front gates, and I'd taken the way that led to the back gate.

Wondering how I should call out to him, I took a few steps forward but then stopped on the spot.

I stopped because I'd discovered someone else, someone who was not Hayama, standing in a spot where the orange light of the streetlights barely reached.

I automatically hopped back to hide behind the wall of the school. As I pressed my back flat against it, the coldness seeped into my skin.

It was dark around, so I couldn't tell who it was with Hayama. But still, I could tell from the figure's stature that it was a girl. Snippets of their conversation, like "Sorry for calling you out so suddenly" reached me over the wind, and from the tone of it, I figured out that she was a girl from our grade.

She wore a dark-blue peacoat and a red scarf. Squeezing that scarf tightly over her chest, the girl looked up at Hayama with upturned eyes. She must have been nervous, as even from a distance, I could tell that her thin shoulders were trembling.

Ahhh, that's what's going on.

That was why Tobe had been so evasive.

The girl took a little breath in, and then, steeling herself, she squeezed the collar of her coat. "Um…I heard from a friend. Hayama. Is it true that you're dating someone now?"

"No, I'm not."

"So then, would you—?"

"I'm sorry. I can't really consider any of that right now."

Though their voices were quiet, I just barely managed to pick

up a little of their exchange.

But I couldn't hear them at all after that.

I'm sure both of them couldn't say anything.

But I didn't need to listen in further to understand.

A unique, strained sense of anxiety and a despair that was far from his usual breeziness. The atmosphere was befitting of the cold winter air in the darkness, much like what I'd felt on my skin just moments ago.

It was strikingly similar to that scene during the Christmas season: Iroha Isshiki and Hayato Hayama at Destiny Land.

Eventually, they exchanged a few words, and they probably said good-bye to each other. The girl waved weakly, then turned around and started walking.

As Hayama watched the girl leave, his shoulders dropped slightly, and he breathed out a long, long sigh, lifting his face. Then it seemed he noticed me.

He smiled. He wasn't embarrassed or shy, and he definitely didn't look glad—he just seemed resigned. "You sure caught me at an odd moment."

"Oh, um, well, you know… Sorry." When he addressed me first, it took the wind out of my sails. Thanks to that, I couldn't find anything proper to say. Well, even if he hadn't said anything, I wouldn't have known how to talk to him anyway. If I'd been talking to the rejectee, I could have come up with some words of consolation, but I couldn't think of what to say to the one who had done the rejecting.

But Hayama must have seen I was hesitating, as he cracked a little smile. "Don't worry about it. I've already made my club mates feel awkward about it today." By the way he was talking, it seemed this had happened more than once over the past few days.

"Rough times, huh?" Frankly, that was all I could say. I wasn't really interested in Hayato Hayama's romantic entanglements, and you can't even get jealous of a guy who has as much as he's got. Maybe it would have been kind of me to crack some jokes and tease him, but unfortunately, we weren't that close.

Hayama's face twisted for just a second—choking almost, as if he were resisting some kind of pain.

But then he immediately gave a light shake of his head and put on his usual smile, indicating with a jab of his chin that we go to the parking lot, and I started walking after him.

“I think Yukinoshita has it worse than I do,” he said.

“What? Yukinoshita? Why?” That name was so unexpected, I didn’t even think before I asked.

Without turning around, Hayama tossed the words back at me. “You know the types—people who get a kick out of invading others’ privacy. Maybe they’re just curious, but they cause trouble for others,” he said, his voice far sharper than usual. I couldn’t quite connect the impression I was getting now to the guy who always wore such a mild smile.

But I understood that Hayama was talking about those rumors.

The girl who had come to confess to Hayama just now surely had friends who had used those rumors as jokes to egg her on. And more of the same had probably been going on for the past few days, too.

Still walking, Hayama glanced back at me. Under the glow of the streetlights, his expression was apologetic, his eyebrows slightly lowered. “This situation might be causing trouble for Yukinoshita, too. Sorry, but could you apologize to her for me?”

“Do it yourself.”

“I want to, but if I went to talk to her now…the rumors would just grow even more. With things like this, you just have to let it lie.”

Hayama sounded like he was speaking from personal experience—just reciting from memory the truths he’d acquired from his own past experiences.

And I’m sure he wasn’t the only one who had learned those truths. She probably had, too.

When this thought hit me, I just about jerked to a stop right there. But I somehow made my legs move, taking one step forward.

“You’re used to this… Does this happen a lot?” I asked.

But Hayama gave just a moment’s shrug, then immediately brought up something entirely different. “……Anyway, didn’t you have something you wanted to talk about with me?”

That alone was enough to tell me that it was a subject he’d rather avoid.

So then this was the line I could not step past.

Respecting the indicated boundary line, I joined him in talking about something else. “Oh, it’s nothing big, but there was something I kinda wanted to ask…about your, um, course stream,” I said.

“Oh, that,” Hayama muttered softly, and then he smiled wryly. “Did someone ask you to ask me?

“Uh, well…for reference.” Of course I couldn’t tell him Miura had asked us to.

When I failed to reply, Hayama breathed a short sigh again. “… Is this just for *work* again?” His reply was cold with a somehow disdainful tinge to it. He was ahead of me, so I couldn’t see his expression. The only thing in my view was his tightly clenched fists. “You never change,” he spat, and I could hear his words clearly, even with the wind blowing in my face. With every gust, the sheet-iron roof of the parking lot groaned, and a rusty, abandoned bicycle rattled and creaked.

They were unpleasant sounds. My voice sharpened as I replied, “I told you before. This is just what my club does. It’s acts of service.”

“I see. So then can I make a request?” Hayama asked, then stopped, turning back to me. “Could you quit giving me all this trouble?”

There wasn’t even the slightest smile on his face. His clenched fists went slack, and there was no strength or inflection in his tone. But his voice was not lost in the wind; it quietly rang out through the night, behind the school.

There was no reply, no follow-up, and a slight stillness followed.

But just for a moment.

Hayama immediately smiled and then tried to play it off as a joke. “…If someone said that to you, I mean—then what would you do next?” he asked, teasing.

“What would I do? I mean, I’ll think about it when the time comes.”

“…I see.”

We didn’t say anything to each other after that, coming up in front of the parking lot. There, Hayama came to a stop and pointed to the back exit. “I take the train.”

“Oh, okay,” I said, meaning that to be a farewell, but Hayama was still standing there.

He was staring at the sky.

Wondering if he could see something, I was drawn to look up as well.

But there was just the school building, with its lights off, and

the glow of the streetlights reflecting off the window glass. There were no moon or stars, only the reflected image of the artificial lights.

Suddenly, Hayama opened his mouth as if he'd just remembered something. "As for your earlier question—I won't answer it, but you're free to guess. I don't know who asked you to do this…but they need to think over it carefully themselves, or they're sure to regret it," he said, then started walking off into the darkness beyond the streetlights.

I knew the way ahead of him led to the back entrance, and for a moment, I didn't know where he was headed anymore.

His words weren't for me.

But mysteriously, it seemed as if they weren't really for their true recipient, either.

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As I spent my days at school, sparing just the slightest bit of attention for our friend Hayato Hayama and his circumstances, I noticed something.

Put simply, Iroha Isshiki's worries had been on the mark.

As she said in the clubroom the other day, that rumor had indeed changed the environment around Hayama somewhat.

In the hallways and in the classrooms, the rumors of Hayama and Yukinoshita spread in whispers.

Unsurprisingly, given that this was Hayama and Yukinoshita, two of the most well-known people in the school. And that interest applied to both girls and boys.

When I was zoning out in the classroom during breaks, I could tell the others were stealing looks at Hayama. Even now, I could hear the girls sitting diagonally behind me chatting.

"I wonder how much of that is true."

"Right? I'm so curious. Maybe they really are dating. What do you think?"

"But when a girl from Class E asked, he said they weren't."

"I mean, he's not going to just tell her the truth and kick her while she's down. He's so nice!"

"That's not being nice! It is funny, though."

They didn't say explicitly who it was, but I was basically certain

they were discussing the rumor about Hayama and Yukinoshita.

This was beyond smoke without fire. There wasn't even any kindling or a camping spot. But unfortunately, there were sparks. That's why it had caught everyone's attention and why they were having so much fun with it.

Well, seventeen-year-old girls are chatty melons who love to talk, and if something is related to school celebrities in their lives, the subject will tend to come up.

These girls whose names I didn't really know continued to whisper.

"Kinda surprising, right? Yukinoshita may not look the type to go after the good-looking ones, but when push comes to shooove…"

"Ohhh, I get that. I mean, they never even hung out before. It's like it's totally just about looks?"

"Hey, but then that means Hayama is shallow, too!"

"Isn't he, though?"

The voices talking and giggling together were quiet. They were trying to be careful to keep Hayama and his friends from hearing, more or less.

It was really grating.

Honestly, it was pissing me off.

The noise of it was unpleasant, like a mosquito buzzing right when you're falling asleep, or the sound the second hand makes late at night when you can't sleep. Just listening to it made me click my tongue at them.

I had no part of this situation, and even I was getting irritated. For the subjects of the gossip, it had to be worse.

The girls I didn't really know threw out whatever mildly envious and random speculation, conjecture, and wishes they wanted. They followed the moment and rolled the conversation in the direction most amusing to them.

I'm sure most people like that don't have any ill will. They only do it because they're having fun. If you get serious and try to refute it, they'd be like, *It's a joke; don't get so serious*.

Watching it happen in front of me—no, more because I'd come to know the two of them—for the first time, I understood.

Yukino Yukinoshita and Hayato Hayama have always lived in this sort of environment. They are exceptional in looks and in talents, so they're the subject of attention and expectation. And that's why they've been hit with proportionate disappointment and

envy, as well.

In the surveillance society that is puberty, school is prison. The popular kids are always exposed to the eyes of the public, while the rest, the majority, begin their unsolicited observation out of good intentions and curiosity. And then, occasionally, they'll even dole out punishments. It's like the Stanford prison experiment being carried out day and night. Nobody had asked any of these boys and girls to do it, but they became aggressive out of this sense that they had a mission.

Behind me, the stupid chatter from those nameless prison guards still continued.

But a hard tapping sound had joined in with their voices. And then the girls stopped flat.

I looked over to the source of the noise.

There was Miura, arms folded, nails tapping in irritation on her desk. Though her face was pointed toward Yuigahama and Ebina, we could see her furious profile from this angle, too.

Even from the front, Miura's attention-grabbing, well-groomed appearance was powerful, but from the side, combined with the nasty look in her eye, she was dominating. *And, like, scary. She's three times scarier than usual.* Even though I wasn't the one getting glared at, I couldn't help but look away.

And Hayama, who sat in front of Miura, smiled wryly back at her.

I doubt either Hayama or Miura had heard the girls' conversation.

But nothing could speak as eloquently as atmosphere.

Even if you didn't hear the words, even if you didn't hear what they were talking about, you could sense on your skin if the air was favorable toward you or cutting you out of something. Just as right this moment, Miura was communicating her hostility to the girls with a single look.

It had gotten uncomfortable for the girls to stay in the classroom, and two of them stood, passing by my side to cheerily head out. *Oh, so a conference in the bathroom, then?*

"That was super-freaky. I wonder if she heard us."

"I dunno… I wonder what Miura thinks, though."

"Who knows."

Pretending I couldn't hear the conversation while they were passing by, I kept my face down on my desk. If I didn't, I'd wind up

staring at Miura's group.

Ripples spreading on the surface of water will eventually disappear, but the butterfly effect does not.

Listening closely to the sound of the wind rattling on the windows, I patiently endured the break time.

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Even after the school day was done, the wind didn't die down.

The air blowing over the Kanto Plains was cold and dry. The damp air coming out from the Sea of Japan side was blocked off by the Ou mountain range, among others, which bunched up the clouds there and only let the wind blow down toward us.

It hit the outside of the clubroom and the windows on the hallway side.

But the inside of the clubroom was filled with warmth and humidity, and the main culprit for that was the steaming tea before me.

I brought the cup to my lips, and once I was comfortable, I started talking. "So, Mr. Hayama in his wisdom totally shut me down…" Being that I'd been a little dramatic about insisting that I be the one to ask him, I couldn't help but apologize a little.

Hearing my report, Yuigahama smiled wryly. "Yeah, I had the feeling he would. Hayato kinda seemed a little grumpy… It's not your fault. You don't have to worry about it."

She's trying to make me feel better…

Yukinoshita sighed with a little smile, too. "We weren't expecting anything, so there's no reason to feel bad."

I wasn't sure if that quite counted as an attempt at consolation, but I could sense some kindness in her tone.

But the third voice held a strong edge of disgust. "I mean, this is you we're talking about."

Is it me you're talking about? You never call me by my name; I get so unsure…

"So why are you here again?" I looked over at Isshiki, who held a paper cup in her hands, and she set the cup down on her desk, adjusted her collar, and smoothed down her skirt. While she was at it, she also fiddled with her bangs a bit and straightened up in her seat.

“I came here today because I actually have something to consult about,” she said, putting on this superserious act. But with the slight bit of collarbone peeking out from her newly adjusted collar, her fluttering skirt hem, and her bangs swept to perfectly frame her eyes as she looked through her lashes at me—she didn’t come off very serious.

I’d just about gotten distracted for a second there, but I stayed strong and tore my eyes from Isshiki. *I won’t fall for that…*

“If it’s helping the student council, we’re not doing that anymore,” I said.

“…Oh, really?” Isshiki muttered, sounding dejected. I got the feeling I heard a slight tongue clicking after that, but that’s my imagination, right? Irohasu?

Suddenly, Yukinoshita cleared her throat to intervene. “You wouldn’t possibly have come to request help?” Even as she smiled brightly, there was a force in her voice. Her tone was soft, but it sent a shiver down my spine.

Isshiki immediately straightened her posture. “O-of course! It’s a joke! I’m doing my job!”

Seeing Isshiki’s attitude, Yukinoshita breathed an exasperated sigh and asked, “So then what do you want?”

Yuigahama decided to intervene. “I think Iroha-chan probably wanted to know about Hayato’s course stream and came to ask, right?”

“I knew you’d get it, Yui! That’s right! But that’s not aaall.”

Yukinoshita prompted her to continue with a look. So Isshiki touched her hand to her chin, and pondering, she began, “It’s like, you *know*, it looks like there’s kinda more girls coming to make a pass at him.”

“What do you mean?” Yuigahama asked, and Isshiki answered with indifference.

“Well, confessing and stuff, to be frank. And even if they don’t go that far, they just check with him, like getting his attention.”

Her statement reminded me of what I’d seen the day before, when heading home. Of course, I hadn’t told Yukinoshita and Yuigahama about that, so it seemed something else about what Isshiki said had stuck with them.

“What do you mean, ‘check with him’?” asked Yukinoshita.

“And that gets his attention?” Yuigahama added.

With the other two girls giving her questioning looks, Isshiki

cleared her throat to test her voice and straightened up. Then she turned her whole chair around to face me.

She expelled a short but heated sigh and leveled a serious gaze at me. “Hey…are you…dating anyone right now?” Her voice was wobbly and unsure, her words hesitant, her cheeks blushing pink. Her wrists were startlingly white and thin in their overlong cuffs. Her hand clenched around the ribbon at her chest nervously, the wrinkling of her shirt communicating an earnest air.

Her wet eyes wavered delicately.

She’d caught me off guard, and I could feel my heartbeat accelerating. I swallowed in an attempt to quiet it. “No, I’m not…,” I rasped.

The clubroom went dead silent.

Of course I wasn’t saying anything, and Yukinoshita and Yuigahama weren’t, either.

In the silence, Isshiki broke into a nasty grin. “See, it’s something like that. Just like that!”

“Th-the issue here is how you say it! Right, Hikki?”

……*Well, it’s not like putting on that show has no effect. Yeah. Actually, it did have quite the effect. Not bad, Iroha Isshiki.*

“Hikki?”

Hearing my name, I looked over at Yuigahama and Yukinoshita to see they were giving me dull expressions.

“…Why aren’t you saying anything?” Yukinoshita smiled pleasantly.

Stop it—that smile of yours is scary. “W-well, uh, so like. I get Hayama’s situation now. Yeah, I really, really get it.” So they wanted to discover if the rumors were true or false and, if possible, to move on to a confession. And even if you didn’t go that far, you could use it as a chance to get closer? Something like that?

Maybe you could say it was like a character you thought was impossible to romance now having their route unlocked in the expansion pack… Or is it an *eek-eek tee-hee* scenario added via fan patch?

Regardless, I think it’s fair to blame this phenomenon on rumor’s influence.

“So then what did you want to consult about?” I asked.

Isshiki puffed out her chest smugly. “I want to know a way to set myself apart from my rivals!”

“Uh-huh…” She kinda had guts to still not give up, so I offered

her a vague answer that was half-impressed, half-exasperated, and half-indifferent. That makes a total one and a half, huh?

She must have assumed I was listening from that. I wasn't, but she went on at length anyway. "Depending on the way you look at it, we have an opportunity here. Normally, people will confess and then give up right there, right? And he's kind of sick of having people confess to him, right? But I'm a safe person in a way, meaning I can ambush—*oh wait*, I mean comfort him to the fullest!"

The way she corrected herself was pretty forced… And what exactly is full comfort? Isshiki isn't exactly full and ample… Her appeal is in her delicate aura, her youthfulness… Uh, that's not what we were talking about! I don't care about what happens between Hayama and Isshiki, so I kinda zoned out at some point in her explanation.

When I looked over at Yuigahama and Yukinoshita, wondering if they were actually listening, I saw they were listening quite seriously.

"A safe person…"

"Ambush…"

They both muttered, watching Isshiki like a pair of hawks. They were so serious, for a second the temperature dropped like a rock. …*This doesn't feel so good!*

But Isshiki didn't notice their looks. She was gazing out the window. She was probably watching the soccer club practicing in the courtyard.

"So I thought just *super* -casually hanging out with him might be a good idea to cheer him up…" Isshiki's profile was anxious but gentle, illuminated by the light of the setting sun.

Though her manner was lighthearted, I think in her own way, she was trying to be thoughtful for Hayama.

Hey, she's actually thinking this through. I think if she were to show that side of her, it'd catch most guys off their guard, though… "That doesn't seem like such a bad idea." I smiled a little as that popped out of my mouth.

Isshiki beamed. "Right! So then it's like, where'd be a good place, huh?"

"Uh, you're the one who's typically good with that stuff." *You're absolutely asking the wrong people.* I'm sure Yuigahama has some information from friends, so she's one thing, but nobody would expect me or Yukinoshita to go to hang out like that.

When I told her that, Isshiki puffed up her cheeks in a pout. “I already tried everything I thought up before! So I wanted an opposite sort of approach.”

“Oh, I see…” She’s got an incredible ability to take action. Does this mean she’s a member of Tokio after all?

While I was busy being impressed, Yuigahama put her index finger to her chin and tilted her head. “So you want a place where you can hang out casually and not make it a big deal… And we need to help you think one up?”

“Basically, yeah, something like that,” Isshiki replied, answering Yuigahama with a nod.

Yukinoshita sighed softly. “Well, why not, I suppose,” she said with a smile, looking more big sister–ish than usual.

Isshiki must have felt she could be more friendly with Yukinoshita when she was like this, as she laughed. “Ah-ha! Thanks so much! …So what do you think?” She turned to me.

“There’s not much use asking me…” I really couldn’t think of anything. *Well, wouldn’t Destiny Land be a good idea?* But of course, that was a little iffy for someone who had just gotten rejected there…

I didn’t really know what sort of stuff Hayama liked, but no matter what they did or where they went, he’d look like he was enjoying himself well enough. Whether he actually would be was a different question.

As I was pondering this, Yuigahama scooched up ahead, chair and all. “Wh-what do you think’d be good, Hikki? Um, like for reference…”

“I’m totally different from Hayama, so I’d be useless as a reference,” I said.

Yukinoshita giggled. “Yes, you’re at completely opposite poles.”

“Right?”

“Yes, indeed,” Yukinoshita agreed. Her tone was a bit mocking, but I wasn’t mad.

It was true enough that we were actually at opposite poles, after all. I take pride in being a man of middlingly decent caliber, but I come nowhere near Hayama… And isn’t the petty act of boasting about your own high caliber basically proof that I’m at opposite poles from Hayama?

Seriously, what is *up* with this petty smallness…? Well, girls are into those little accessories and knickknacks, aren’t they? So doesn’t

it follow that they'd be into small and petty people?! Positivity!!

Yukinoshita quietly cleared her throat while I was in my own head. Then she turned away to add rapidly, "…But it's because you are opposites that I think the reference would be useful. If you take the inverse of your opposite's opinion, isn't that essentially the correct answer? The opposite of opposition is agreement, right?"

"The inverse of the inverse isn't necessarily the truth…" *There's something wrong with that logic. The opposite of opposition is approval? You're not Bakabon's dad…*

Or so I was about to argue, but Yukinoshita and Yuigahama were both staring at me, waiting for an answer.

Uh, um, when you stare at me like that, I start remembering things. It's uncomfortable, so please don't. "…Um, I'll think about it," I managed to say, then sneaked my gaze out the window.

And then, from nowhere in particular, I faintly heard a slightly exasperated, dissatisfied huff or whiff of a sigh.

"Go ahead. Think about it carefully," Isshiki said with a sweet smile.

But I'm still kinda stuck, y'know… I can barely handle myself; I don't have any spare consideration for Isshiki—actually, I'd even like to ask her… Well, whatever. I'll think up something later.

Anyway, the change in Isshiki's attitude toward Hayama was probably part of the rumor's influence. Things around him were definitely starting to change.

Well then, what about the people in the whirlpool surrounding the other relevant party?

"…That reminds me. What about you, Yukinoshita? Has anything changed for you since that rumor?" I asked her.

"Me? Hardly anyone visits my class in the first place, so…"

It's true that the International Curriculum classroom, Class J, is at the very end of the hall, and the class is 90 percent girls. It's pretty different from the rest, and the kids from other classes don't go out of their way to see them there. In that sense, her situation might be somewhat preferable to Hayama's.

But still, it seemed she wasn't completely unaffected.

Yukinoshita breathed a short sigh. "Well, it seems there are people saying whatnot in the shadows, but there's been some of that for some time, so I can't quite make a judgment…"

"I get it," Isshiki agreed. "When you stand out, people will say all sorts of stuff behind your back, huh…?"

No, I think in your situation, Isshiki, it's a little different…

Yukinoshita smiled at Isshiki, nodding a little at her, then added quietly, "…But it's not as bad as it used to be."

The words *as it used to be* stuck with me.

She had a past I can't know about. That she won't talk about. And it's connected to him.

But could I ask that? At the very least, I could tell I shouldn't ask with other people around. Did I have the right to ask about these things when she hadn't brought it up herself?

Still feeling hesitant, I started to open my mouth.

Then suddenly, there were two, three knocks on the door. Everyone automatically looked over there, and I missed my moment to ask.

And then, without waiting for any reply, the door was thrown open without reserve.

"…You got a minute?" the newcomer asked, her tone filled with wrath. She swept a glare over the room, her loosely spiraling golden hair swaying in displeasure. Yes, the one standing in the doorway was Yumiko Miura.

"Yumiko, what's wrong?" Yuigahama asked.

"…I wanted to talk about something."

"Ohhh. Well, then come in, come in," Yuigahama said to her. Miura nodded, stepping into the clubroom. Then she gave Isshiki a suspicious look.

"Oh. I have student council work, so…," Isshiki said, sensing that she wasn't wanted, and scurried out of the clubroom. "See you guys!" she said in a tiny voice, then slid the door shut.

Once Yuigahama saw Isshiki was gone, she offered Miura a chair. We naturally lined up facing Miura—me, then Yuigahama, then Yukinoshita.

"You mean about that e-mail?" Yuigahama asked.

"Not that… Well, that's part of it," Miura said vaguely, turning away. But then she gave a big sigh, and next, she turned to Yukinoshita. "…So, like, is there something between you and Hayato?"

Her words and gaze were sharp.

There was no doubt she was talking about that rumor. The irresponsible, whispered rumors about Hayama and Yukinoshita were all over the school.

I should have realized back on the first day the club had

reopened and Isshiki had come charging in—that there was a possibility other girls would come directly to Yukinoshita to confirm the facts.

Miura had to be the closest to Hayama, so there was no way she wouldn't be thinking anything about this.

Her gaze was blazing, but Yukinoshita took it coolly.

"There isn't anything, really. We've just known each other for a long time," she answered carelessly.

But Miura's sharp gaze did not let up. "Really?"

Yukinoshita gave an exasperated sigh. "What would I accomplish by lying? …It's so annoying when people do this."

"What? Why do you have to say it like that? God, you're pissing me off. I hate how you're always like that."

"Yumiko!" Yuigahama's tone was surprisingly accusatory. Miura's shoulders twitched, startled, and she hesitantly, slowly turned her head around.

Yuigahama was pouting, almost angry. She repeated the same thing she'd said at some point in the classroom. "I explained about that before. They honestly just ran into each other—that was all—and nothing happened after."

"…If that was all, Hayato wouldn't be so worried about it. Something like this has never happened before," Miura said, and she sounded somehow sulky, totally unlike her usual confident manner. Her face was tilted downward as she bit her lip slightly.

Miura was probably the one positioned closest to Hayato Hayama at this school. I don't know how long they've been friends, but I think they've been close since second year started.

That's why anything off with Hayama would be more apparent to her. She was sure to have a far more accurate grasp of things than someone like me.

But there were things that even Miura couldn't know.

The only one here who was privy to that information was Yukino Yukinoshita.

Sweeping the hair off her shoulders, Yukinoshita said coldly, "He's not actually worried about me. I think he's concerned about something else."

"That's… That could just be what you think. You don't know how Hayato feels." Miura's shoulders dropped, and she fiddled with her hair with a fingertip as she quietly asked Yukinoshita, "… Something…happened, didn't it? Not like this thing now…but, like,

a long time ago.”

Her words broken up by pauses.

That was something I had considered but had chosen to exclude. *There’s no way.*

Yukino Yukinoshita does not lie. However, she does avoid speaking the truth. She will also gloss over things by being taciturn and by using roundabout expressions. I know that.

So what about Hayato Hayama? I have no idea what he feels in his heart, his emotions, or anything. I don’t really want to know.

That’s what I’d been telling myself anyway, avoiding thinking about it, even though I was certain there had been something between the two of them.

And now, Miura was trying to touch on that.

But Yukinoshita brushed her aside with a sigh. “…If something had happened, and I gave you the details, would that change anything? Would you or others trust that?”

Yukinoshita sounded like she was cross-examining Miura, leaving her unable to reply. She tried to respond anyway, clenching the hem of her cardigan, lips trembling, but her voice never came out.

Yukinoshita breathed a shallow sigh. “It would be ultimately pointless.”

Explanations, excuses, defenses, and dialogue do not create meaning in and of themselves.

There’s a reason we call it the lowest common denominator, the bigger the group of people you make, the greater the level of their stupidity. When you get thrown into the middle of that, and no matter how exceptional you are—no, the more exceptional you are—the violence of their numbers will erase you. The mob doesn’t care about your individual will, your uniqueness, your personality, and certainly not your feelings.

This is the failure to understand that Yukino Yukinoshita has experienced.

In the society where we live, people see things the way they want to see them and only listen to what they want to hear, and yet they don’t say what they actually want to say.

But Miura was different.

“God, why are you so…?!” With fury clear in her voice, she stood.

“Hey, Yumiko?!”

Yuigahama's startled call, an attempt to stop her, didn't make it in time. I jumped to my feet as well, but it was like Yukinoshita was the only thing Miura could see, and she strode straight up to her.

"What the hell is with you?!" And then she swung out her arm and tried to grab at Yukinoshita.

But her hand never reached its target.

Yukinoshita smoothly rose to her feet, stopping Miura's hand as it reached for her collar. Then she gave Miura a cold look.

"…!"

"Unfortunately, I'm used to this… You're the first one to make it physical like this, though."

The heated sigh and cold remark crossed paths as they glared at each other. Miura's breathing gradually got shallower and shallower, as if she were struggling against something inside her, while Yukinoshita breathed out a deep, deep sigh.

"Is there still something you'd like to say? Or is there more?"

Contrasted with Miura, who was gradually losing momentum, Yukinoshita's emotions were roiling up more aggressively. It was as if heat were passing through their locked gazes and grasp.

Yukinoshita had a challenging, callous smile on her face. I found myself thinking something that didn't fit the situation at all: *Damn, that look really reminds me of Haruno.*

But it wasn't a smile I wanted to look at for long.

"Let her go. Just calm down a minute and sit down." I lightly slapped Yukinoshita's hand, which still had a grip on Miura's arm. I hesitated a moment, unsure if I could touch her, but when Yukinoshita was this combative, it was probably more effective than words.

For an instant, Yukinoshita glared daggers at me, but she obediently released Miura's arm. Miura let it dangle, taking a step back.

I cut into the space that had opened between them, pushing Miura back with gestures to avoid touching her. Yuigahama handled it from there.

Miura was still glaring resentfully at Yukinoshita, so Yuigahama bopped Miura on the shoulder and sat her down where she'd been before. "Let's just calm down a little… Okay?"

Still watching the two of them, I moved my chair into a position where I could immediately get in between Miura and Yukinoshita if I had to.

“You okay?” I asked Yukinoshita.

“Yes. I told you, didn’t I? I’m used to it.” Yukinoshita tightly clenched the hand that had caught Miura’s arm, and she gave me a slightly crooked smile. The aggressive emotion from earlier was now gone.

“Yukinon…,” Yuigahama said.

“It’s nothing to worry about now… If the people close to me understand, that’s enough for me.” Yukinoshita gave a little smile, and there was no bravado in it. She gently stroked her clenched hand, then sat back down. I sighed in relief at things finally settling down, and Yuigahama returned to her seat as well.

Miura was silent the whole time, watching the other two girls, eyes narrowed. She seemed unsure what to do with the scene she was watching.

And then she pouted her lips just a bit, quietly whispering, “… Yeah, duh… That’s why.”

“Huh?” Yuigahama asked back.

Miura jerked her gaze away. “I mean, I wanna… I wanna be like that to him. Someone close,” she added, mumbling with embarrassment, mussing at her hair. Then she turned away from us and looked out the window in a show of disinterest.

Oh, I get it.

Though I’m sure she hadn’t been trying to communicate anything clear to us, I understood it. I couldn’t help but understand it. Well, *understand* may not be the right word—something in me could feel and sympathize with it.

Yukinoshita wasn’t the only one who had experienced that failure of understanding.

He shared her past, so he had experienced it, too.

There was no way that just one of them had dealt with that twisted failure to understand—the other had been misunderstood as well, hadn’t he?

“Miura. What you actually want to know isn’t what happened way back when, is it…?” I think there was some surprise slipping into my voice.

When I said that, Miura gave me a sharp glare. But instead of its usual force, there was a moist shine instead.

I think what Miura actually wanted to know was not what had happened in the past, and it wasn’t even his future course, either.

What was he thinking? What was in his heart?

She just wanted to know his feelings.

She wanted to know *him*.

"I—I just… I mean. It's like, I just kinda thought it'd be nice if we could be together a little longer… Um, all of us, the way we are now…," Miura hurried to say, but the force behind her words wilted away, and her shoulders slowly dropped. "Hayato's been… distant…lately… It kinda feels like he's just gonna drift away," she added in the tiniest voice, her gaze sliding to a corner of the floor.

I don't know when exactly "lately" began. But the environment surrounding Hayato Hayama was changing, bit by bit.

Isshiki's confession, seeing Orimoto and her friends from another school hanging out with him. And the rumors about him and Yukinoshita.

No one had ever talked about Hayato Hayama dating, before. No—to be more accurate, he'd kept himself away from any rumors on the subject. And now, that balance had crumbled.

And right when this rift had begun growing between them, the subject of class divisions had come up. It was fully clear to everyone that the current sense of unity would be lost.

Miura had keenly felt that sense of widening distance.

"I know this is weird, but…I don't really know what else to do." The words just spilled out.

Yuigahama stood and went to Miura, squatting down beside her to gently take her hand. "It's not weird. It's not weird at all. It's a completely natural thing to want to be with someone," she replied kindly.

Miura let out a heavy sigh, head dropping. I just barely caught the sound of a tiny gasp, like a stifled sob.

I'm sure she knew that things couldn't stay the way they were now, and she understood that she couldn't have what she wanted no matter how strongly she felt about the future. She knew that if she said so out loud she would break it, but she still didn't want to lose it.

That was why she wanted to be close, at least, and stay with him. To keep the environment around Hayato Hayama the way he wanted.

That one curt, restrained e-mail was the only modest resistance she could offer. That one single line had contained earnest feelings and a wish.

Which meant there was something I couldn't understand.

I blew a big sigh and said, “But, Miura. If Hayama won’t tell you, then doesn’t that mean he doesn’t want you knowing him that well? Maybe he just doesn’t like you.”

“Hey, Hikki!” Yuigahama snapped in an accusatory tone.

“Hikigaya…” Yukinoshita just seemed confused. Both of them were looking at me.

I didn’t need them telling me—I understood well enough myself that this was a mean thing to ask. But I wanted to ask anyway. It wasn’t that I wanted to know how emotionally ready Miura was. I actually didn’t really care about that.

But I’m still not sure if it’s the right thing to take that step toward someone who doesn’t want you getting close. You can maintain the structure of the relationship without going to the trouble of touching that stuff.

That’s exactly why I was asking.

“Do you still want to know anyway?”

Even if they hate you or avoid you or think you’re shameless, even if you wind up hurting them, is it okay to cross that line? That’s what I meant to ask.

Miura’s answer came immediately. With a teary-eyed glare at me, she clenched her fists tight.

“I want to know… I want to know anyway… Because that’s all I’ve got.”

Her eyes were wet and her voice was shaking, but she gave a firm answer.

That wish had probably been inside her this whole time—her desire to know, to understand him. And now it was spilling out of her as she swallowed a desperate, trembling breath.

If she’ll struggle anyway to know the truth, even knowing it won’t happen…

…then that’s no different from a certain someone I know.

“All right. I’ll figure something out.”

This time, it was my turn to answer without hesitation.

Yuigahama and Yukinoshita both looked a little surprised to hear me say that.

“Figure something out…?” Yuigahama said.

“I’ll get it out of him, by force if I have to. Or if not, I’ll investigate,” I said.

“Even if you do force it out of him, you have no way of knowing if it’s true, though,” said Yukinoshita.

“Yeah. So…after that…I suppose we guess.”

But that alone would probably not be enough.

I had to get an accurate grasp of the reason Hayama so stubbornly brandished his righteous argument to not tell anyone his course stream choice. I’d need to attack this from a variety of angles, but—well, that was a question for later.

Right now, the one important thing was what Miura wanted.

“Neither method will be a guarantee… But if you’re okay with that, I’ll figure it out somehow,” I repeated myself.

Yuigahama examined Miura’s face. “*Are* you okay with that, Yumiko?” she gently asked.

“…Yeah,” Miura replied, just like a little kid, and she sniffed and wiped at her eyes with her sleeve. She was looking like a panda around the eyes.

But seeing her with her eye makeup all smeared, I thought something I’d never thought before. *Yumiko Miura is a cute girl.*

5

Saika Totsuka is waiting until that someday comes.

The day after Miura came was a clear winter day.

I was outside, dragging my feet on the way to gym class under the overbright sky. I anticipated that night would be a chilly one, from the radiational cooling.

But since I was about to be doing some endurance running, I was grateful for this blue, completely cloudless sky. I'd just be lying around at home anyway that night, so it didn't matter to me if it got cold…

There were three classes' worth of kids all out in the courtyard. This running class wasn't divided into boys and girls like for the other gym units. The boys and girls did do different courses, but it was just running.

As we were lining up on the sports field, I caught sight of Miura among a group of girls.

Since morning, Miura had been trying to keep me out of her field of vision. During class and break times, she'd kept her head leaned on her hand the whole time, her face turned away from me. And during every break, Yuigahama had come up beside her to chat about this and that.

I couldn't exactly stare at her so I could be sure, but it seemed she had calmed dawn a lot compared with the day before, at least.

After what had happened, I'd left first just to let her decompress. I was a guy with basically no connection to her; she wouldn't be comfortable with me there.

So I didn't know what the three of them had talked about after I'd left. Given how Miura was crying, I kinda even doubted they could have had a decent conversation.

Our Miss Miura is surprisingly sensitive, huh…? Didn't she also cry during summer vacation, when Yukinoshita shot her down…?

But I think she's strong at her core.

I want to know, she'd said, and her voice still lingered in my ears.

As I was getting lined up, I set my gaze up front. Ahead of me was Hayato Hayama. He was chatting pleasantly with Tobe and the guys, and he didn't notice my eyes on him. Or maybe he did and was acting like he didn't—like he did with many other things.

I mean, why wouldn't he tell anyone what courses he's taking? Maybe rather than simply asking what his choice was, it'd be faster to pursue the reason he was stubbornly refusing to say and tear that down.

As I was standing there zoning out, the gym teacher Atsugi finished roll call. "Right. Then pair with whoever you like and get to warm-ups," he said forcefully, and the class moved on to everyone doing so.

Guess I should use this moment to make contact with someone close to Hayama and try asking them.

But who to ask?

Was there anyone at school who knew him better than Miura? At the very least, Miura and her friends seemed the closest to him, and Miura often had her eye on Hayama. Not many would be closer.

So then I should change the way I was thinking about this. Try a different angle. How about talking to someone who got along with Hayama and thought like he did? For example, Totsuka, who was also a club captain. Or Totsuka, who was in the same class as him. Or Totsuka, who went to the same school as him. Or Totsuka, who was also a boy… Well, I'm not really sure, but—Totsuka. I can't put my finger on why. But definitely Totsuka.

Right then, guess I'll warm up with Totsuka, I was thinking, looking all around the area excitedly, when a voice called for me.

"Hachimaaan!"

I spun around, and our eyes met.

Lumbering heavily over the ground, smiling and waving at me, was Zaimokuza. *Why does he look so happy…?*

"Hachimaaan, let's warm up!"

"Uh-huh… Uh, you don't have to say it like, *C'mon and let's play baseball…* And there was kinda someone else today…" I tried to let him down, but Zaimokuza was not listening at all. He just started babbling.

“Ho, there, they may have told us to band with one we like, but I pair not with you for such reasons, you know… D-don’t get the wrong idea there, okay?”

“Don’t blush and look away…”

I looked away from Zaimokuza to scan the area and found Hayama, Tobe, Ooka, and Yamato all pairing up to start warm-ups. *Ahhh! Even Totsuka has already paired up! But I wanted to use this as an excuse to soften up his joints…*

“Guess I’ve got no choice…” Resigning myself, I decided to pair with Zaimokuza and start warming up. I stretched and shook myself out. When I was done, Zaimokuza sat down, and I pushed his back.

But there was no point just aimlessly warming up. I would exercise my special skill, human observation, in the meantime.

From the corner of my eye, I looked over at Hayama. But since the guys were kind of far away, I couldn’t get a good view. He had that breezy smile on his face, so they were probably having some fun, popular-kid conversation. From where I was, I couldn’t tell what they were talking about.

I’ve got to get a bit closer… So I could lean farther forward, I put my weight into it, shoving Zaimokuza over.

“Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow! Hyerk!”

When I heard him shriek, I realized I’d forced him into a pretty unreasonable stretch and immediately backed off. Then, seemingly from the backlash, Zaimokuza flopped dramatically onto his back and spasmed there.

It was night and day compared with Hayama’s group in the distance. I compared us and them via stolen glances, but there was not a shred of fun popular-kid energy on this end. A dark chuckle slipped from my lips, and Zaimokuza caught it with disapproval.

“Hey, cut it out, Hachiman. Don’t compare us with them.”

“Mm, yeah. Sorry.”

“Doing that will only result in misery. Not only is he handsome and smart and athletic, he’s a good enough fellow to remember my name. Come now, Hachiman, there’s no need for you to deprecate yourself so.”

“Huh, you were talking about me?” *I thought for sure we were talking about not comparing Zaimokuza with Hayama, though?*

But when people are this different, it’s only natural to make comparisons.

“That reminds me—what course stream are you picking?”

Yukinoshita had said Hayama's opposite would be useful, right? When that thought crossed my mind, I decided to ask and try out the idea.

Still sprawled on the ground, Zaimokuza tilted his head with a *frm?* then answered, "I, you ask? Sciences."

"Huh?"

"…What does that look mean? Have you some problem with that?"

"Uh, I just thought for sure you'd pick arts. Couldn't it help you be a light-novel author?"

"Shallow thinking, shallow!" Zaimokuza waggled a finger at me. "Tsk. tsk," he said, as if a tongue click were an actual word.

Obnoxious… I wish he'd get hit with an Explosion and faint…

"I can gain arts-related knowledge on my own, through my hobbies. The problem is fields I lack interest in. I shall not learn such things unless forced by necessity."

"…Ah, ahhh. This is the first I've ever thought of you as acceptable." His opinion there was incredibly legitimate, and for an instant, my heart stirred.

But a Zaimokuza who isn't trash isn't Zaimokuza at all… Making up reasons and excuses for everything, turning away from reality, then finally embracing his ideals and dying by drowning is who Zaimokuza is… For the rest of my life, I'll treasure the Zaimokuza in my heart. Good-bye, Zaimokuza.

As I was silently saying my private farewell to the Zaimokuza in reality, he pushed himself off and brushed off the dirt. "Well, I'm also not particularly skilled in math and sciences…"

"Then you're gonna have a bad time with your entrance exams."

"Aye. But…I'm far worse with the maidens than I am with the subjects numerical and scientific…," Zaimokuza said in a peaceful tone, a faraway look in his eyes. I could sense a hint of enlightenment in his voice, like he was arriving at a mental state of nonself. He had such tranquility to him, I couldn't say a word, and he continued further. "In the science classes, I can live a life of ease. With fewer girls, the classroom shall be a comfortable place. And the girls who choose sciences would be the quiet types, would they not?"

"Uhhh, I dunno if they'd be the quiet types or not, but…I see… you could look at it that way…" This was kind of a revelation. It's

true that science classes are 80 percent guys. You'd have fairly reduced contact with girls.

As I was starting to see the sense in this, Zaimokuza's eyes were madly burning. "Ha! My standard score and my IQ are far and above those of ditzy, moronic humanities girls; they're beneath my notice! Let those arts types spend their whole lives considering the author's feelings on every test!!" he spat.

What a wildly prejudiced and bigoted premodern authoritarian—talking with him is a relief… I can sense the sore loser here! Zaimokuza really has to be like this!

But you know, I hear that girls in science classes tend to turn into the princess of the circle of male *otaku*, so Hachiman thinks you should watch out! It's not strange at all, as a girl, to develop that sort of princess consciousness when you spend every day surrounded by a whole bunch of guys. Just like princess cells that awaken from the kiss from a prince, it changes a normal girl into a woman in STEM…

The reason Zaimokuza was going for sciences was very sad, but I'm sure the reason he said first was also true. He's thinking about these things, surprisingly, in his own way.

"Well, sciences seem rough, but do your best," I said.

"Ferm, I need not such tellings from thee. I shall not fail my exams to become a *rurouni, nin nin*."

"You're going kind of overboard with the references, man."

Finishing off the rest of the stretching, Zaimokuza and I both got up and headed for the starting point of the run. There were already other boys gathered there, and we lined up pretty far back.

Zaimokuza stuck up a thumb, jabbing at himself. "Hachiman… run with me awhile!"

"No."

We're not girls, so why do we have to run together?

Stopwatch in hand, Atsugi blew his whistle. The guys started running in order, from the front, and we followed after, getting off to a lazy start.

Looking ahead and around, it seemed everyone was casually jogging. Well, I doubt there was anyone who'd get serious for a gym class run.

This was fourth period, and lunchtime immediately followed, so if you used up all your energy here and then ate, you'd sleep right through fifth period. Exhaustion plus a full stomach plus a warm

classroom equals sleepy. Heck, I'll sleep in class even when I'm not tired.

As for us, apathetically trailing along near the end, Zaimokuza was starting to lag behind only a few minutes after we started. And this is the guy who was just calling over his back, *Can you keep up with me?*

"N-ngh… The heavy acceleration phenomenon… The Heaviness…"

"I'm going ahead," I called out, leaving Zaimokuza behind, and I scuttled up ahead of the group. When someone asks you to run together in an endurance run, manners dictate that you betray them partway. This is how children learn that they shouldn't trust people so easily…

X X X

I got through half of the distance of the run, rotting along by myself and warming up my hamstrings. Heke! No wait, that's Hamtaro…

This class endurance run was a distance of four kilometers. We were circling around the outer circumference of the school. *Wahhh… If I go around and around, I'm gonna turn into butter…*

With such incredibly stupid thoughts as I ran, I eventually caught up to the middle group. I had about average endurance, thanks to riding my bicycle to school every day.

Yes, it was the middle group, but aside from the front-runners and those who wanted to get this over with as fast as possible to take a long break, nobody was motivated here. I'd include this stratum in the back half, overall.

There, I found Tobe and his buddies.

If sports team guys were running like they normally would, they'd be getting way better times. I didn't even need to bother checking to see they were also half-assing the run.

They were casually chatting, occasionally smacking each other's shoulders or jabbing each other's heads, or doing pointless short sprints to compete, teasing each other good-naturedly. If I were a pigtailed class rep character, I'd be telling them off: *Hey! You boys should take this seriously!* and they'd snap back at me like, *Shut up, ugly!* and make me cry, and then at the end-of-run meeting, they'd get shamed for it. Can someone show me some appreciation for not

being a pretty pigtailed class rep girl?

But it was just the usual three stooges there fooling around: Tobe, Yamato, and Ooka, and I didn't see Hayama.

Perfect.

There was something I wanted to ask these guys.

Intently stalking these three clowns—*Three for the Landfill*, if you will—I ran behind them. But I couldn't quite find the right moment to talk to them since we were running. *Kidding! Hachiman just lied to himself!* I wouldn't have been able to find the right moment if they'd been standing still!

There's not really any streetlights, so this is kind of hard… I was like a Rockbomb, wasting my turns doing nothing, when Tobe stopped running.

"You guys can go on without me!" he called to Ooka and Yamato, then crouched down. It looked like he was tying his shoe.

Nice, the guy who's easiest to talk to has stayed behind for me.

"Hey."

"Whoa!"

When I stood behind Tobe and addressed him, he tipped over on the ground like he was trying to break a fall, then turned back to me. "Ah, geez, it's Hikitani. If you were there, then say so. You startled the hell outta me."

Uh, that was kinda much for just being startled… Well, ignoring Tobe's grumbling, guess I'll just go and ask what I wanted to ask. "Hayama isn't with you?"

"Nah. He's taking this seriously. He won last year, so people have serious expectations for him."

"Hmm…" *Is that right?*

The only division in our school marathon was between boys and girls, which meant that if Hayama had won last year, he'd also beat the older grades. Of course he'd be a favorite this year. By the way, I wasn't even on the level of *What rank are you?* I was part of the masses of also-rans.

Well, whatever.

Pointing ahead with a jab of my chin, I indicated that Tobe should run and got my own feet moving. It'd be weird if we just kept standing there, and you couldn't be sure a teacher wouldn't come by on patrol. Tobe went along with it, coming up beside me to start running again.

After some jogging, Tobe tilted his head. He must have been

confused as to why I was running with him. I wanted to get to the matter at hand right away, too.

But Tobe opened his mouth before I did. He exhaled, sounding kind of relieved, and gave me a pathetic little smile. “Man, when I heard that rumor, though, I was honestly kinda freaked out. And I can’t tell anyone, either, y’know?”

“Huh?” I gave Tobe a rather unimpressed look. *Where the hell is this coming from?*

Tobe wiped sweat off his forehead. “I mean, Hayato said initial *Y*, right? And there’s hardly anyone who knows about that.”

“…” I took a second to react, as Tobe had brought up this subject so randomly. But gradually, the various elements came together to form a clear image.

That summer night.

Hayama unable to stand that loudly pestering voice, the initial wrung out of him in the darkness.

Tobe made me remember what had happened with Hayama and the guys, back in Chiba Village. It’s true that time, Hayama had said the girl he liked had the initial *Y*.

For the briefest moment, I was just unconsciously moving my legs, and Tobe turned to examine my face. “Can’t talk about that stuff now, right?” he said.

“Y-yeah…”

This guy literally had just gone and talked about it, though, but is that like—is he the king’s personal barber or something? I’m not a hole you can just yell anything into, though…

“I mean,” said Tobe, “even if I know it’s no way, you get freaked out being the guy who asked, right?”

I managed to figure out what Tobe was trying to say.

“…Yeah, there’s no way, right?” It was like I was agreeing with Tobe, while in truth, I was worried that maybe I was saying something completely different.

I mean, it’s not like this stuff even matters. That wasn’t what I wanted to ask about.

But Tobe was still trying to talk about it. To keep him from doing so, I decided to change the subject, first just like a casual jab, and seize the conversational initiative. “Have you already submitted your survey?”

“Naw, not yet. I was basically thinking of going with sciences, but Ooka and Yamato both are saying arts.”

“Huhhh… You haven’t asked which Hayama’s going for?” Fortunately, since Tobe had brought up others for comparison, it made it easier for me to get down to business.

As far as I could see, Tobe was probably the closest of the boys to Hayama. Hayama was also friends with both Ooka and Yamato, but Tobe being in the same club would be a major advantage. As far as I knew… Which is basically nothing when it comes to Hayama’s friendships.

When I asked him that, Tobe scruffed up the hair at the back of his neck. “Dude, he keeps saying *Just think it over yourself*, and he won’t tell me.”

“I see…” As predicted, I should say.

So then it would be best to approach this from another angle and gather information. Times like these, an easygoing guy like Tobe is helpful. Expecting him to drop information like an RPG villager, I asked something else. “You’re not gonna ask Hayama for advice about your choice?”

“I *did* that, man. Like, asking him what’s good about arts, what’s good about sciences, and then it was like I didn’t even know anymore, y’know?” It seemed Tobe was actually pretty conflicted about this, in his own way, and he breathed a deep sigh. For an instant, his running slowed down.

This advice from Hayama *was* very Hayama… Very proper. Inoffensive.

“Well,” I said, “either choice will have its own advantages and disadvantages. You haven’t asked him which he recommended?”

“He said it’d get in the way of my personal decision.”

“I see…”

Hayama was committed to this.

If you’re easily influenced by others, then you would take the words of a dazzling and charismatic type all the more seriously. Someone like Hayama, who’s found himself in the center of a social circle, has to be aware of the influence of his own words. It’s not really a problem when it comes to hobbies and preferences or fashion, but when it comes to your future career or personal relationships, that involves the rest of your life. All’s well that ends well, obviously, but when something bad happens, such a charismatic person will catch the blame even if they don’t deserve it. Someone who will easily let the opinions and words of another sway them will also easily make those decisions someone else’s

fault.

But I doubted that sort of resentment was a concern for Tobe at least.

Tobe lazily ran along, looking pensive, but then he sighed deeply. His white breath extended in a long trail. "…But Hayato's right."

His words were a little vague, but there was a sincerity in his brevity and the way he was speaking more to the air than to me. It seemed he had an accurate grasp on Hayama's intentions in saying that.

"…You trust him," I said without a thought.

Tobe's eyes widened. "C'mon, the hell, man! That's not what it's about? I mean, Hayato's a reliable guy, I guess? But still."

The word *trust* must have embarrassed Tobe, as his face was red with the cold and embarrassment as he backpedaled. *C'mon, don't act like that! Now I'm even more embarrassed than you for saying it!*

In attempt to smother his embarrassment, Tobe smacked himself in the chest and continued, "I mean, for real, Hayama has done a lot for me. I'm confident in that. Really, dude."

"That's not really something to brag about…"

But Tobe showed no signs of humility. "Aghhh," he moaned as he constantly tugged at the hair at the back of his neck. "Man, I legit owe him. Like a lot."

"Then repay him for it."

"Yeah! Yeah, man… Doesn't look like he needs it, though." Tobe sounded careless at first, but by the end, his enthusiasm was wilting away.

His expression was pretty serious for Tobe. Curious, I prompted him with a look to continue. Tobe scratched his cheek. "I talk to him about stuff a lot…but he never asks me for help, so if he has trouble, I think I just wouldn't know what to say," Tobe said and grinned. It somehow reminded me of the cold dry gust coming from ahead. Not damp or heavy but sad just the same.

Letting silence fall after that would be superawkward, so I just said what popped into my head. "…Well, you know. Maybe he doesn't talk to you about stuff because there's nothing he's worried about."

"Yeah! Hayato's a good-looking guy, after all!"

"Uh, that's not what I mean… Besides, that time at Destiny Land, you gave him a hand, right? I'm sure that was helpful to him.

Not that I know for sure."

This time, his looks did have something to do with it… Being good-looking is tough, huh?

The talk seemed to have cheered Tobe up, as he started going a little faster. With each chilly wind that blew past, he got himself all worked up. "It's so cold, man!"

Eventually, we found Ooka and Yamato running ahead. They'd slowed down, maybe a little worried at how long Tobe was taking to rejoin them.

"Well, I gotta go catch up," said Tobe.

"Uh-huh," I replied.

Tobe lightly waved a hand like he was making a karate chop, then pulled a mad sprint ahead. He ran up to Ooka and Yamato, waving and yelling loudly. The other two were like, "Whoa, there he is!" and "Run!" as they ran off even farther ahead.

They all seem like they're having fun… How nice…

Normally, though, there would have been one more person in that group. I think if he hadn't had the weight of expectations Tobe mentioned on his shoulders, he would've been fooling around with the others.

Pondering these thoughts, I suddenly regretted the words that had just now popped out of my mouth so casually.

He doesn't talk to you about stuff because there's nothing he's worried about?

That can't be true.

× × ×

The bell rang, announcing lunch break.

When we did endurance runs in gym class, once you were done, you were allowed to go straight to break. That meant that even after the time spent getting changed, I easily made it in first at the school store.

I picked out some random snack breads, and while I was at it, I headed to my usual spot for eating lunch. At this time of year, the cold made eating outside a bit of a trial, but the heated classroom was full of people, and there was no place for me there. Actually, when I'd looked just the other day, during lunch break, there'd been convenience store plastic bags on my seat. If I sat in the communal

garbage dump, I would be a nuisance for everyone!

And so out of such thoughtfulness, I chose my standard location, the first floor of the special-use building. I took a seat on the stairs beside the health room, diagonally behind the school store. From there, I could look out over the tennis court.

A regular, rhythmic plunking sounded out in the clear winter air. It seemed the tennis club was using lunch break to practice. There must have been an upcoming tournament—I'd thought Totsuka had been the only one practicing at lunch up until now, but there were others with him today.

Watching their session, I brought my snack to my mouth to munch, and Totsuka noticed my presence. He gave a word to the other club members practicing with him, then came over to me with something in his hands.

"Hey," I called to him.

Totsuka raised his hand back bashfully. "Yeah, hey."

"You don't need to practice?"

"Oh, it's okay. I just decided to eat," he said, lifting up a little lunch box in his hands to show me.

But now it's like I've interrupted his practice, and I feel bad… I never thought he'd come all the way to eat with me… Yikes, I feel like we'll move right on up to the next stage here. At this rate, it's only a matter of time before we arrive at the Love Stage!!

I raised slightly off my seat to shift to the side, and Totsuka said a reserved "Thanks" and sat down beside me.

…Fwa-ha-ha! By using the high-level technique of taking the initiative and opening a space for him like this, I'm directing where he sits!

Watching out of the corner of my eye as Totsuka started laying out his little lunch box, I looked over to the tennis court to see the other club members had also begun their lunch break. "The other guys have started practicing at lunch, too, huh?"

"Yeah, there's a newcomers' match coming up, so I invited everyone… Oh, if you like, you can join in, too, Hachiman! If you start now, you'll make it in time for the summer tournament!" he said jokingly to me as he balled his hands into fists, pumping them up and down.

Pardon me; please give me this Totsuka right here. Actually, I feel like I'd be the one getting taken.

"Yeah," I said, "that depends on what day of the week practice

is…”

“Are you being serious?” Totsuka asked, leaning forward to look me in the eye. His hair fell into his face. His eyes, slightly hidden behind his bangs, sparkled mischievously, and his smile was strangely captivating.

“No, I’m joking.”

“Thought so.” Totsuka’s shoulders dropped in a deliberate show of disappointment. And then we both broke into smiles. It was because we both understood that it would never happen that we could make these kinds of jokes… W-well, the first time he invited me, I was seriously considering joining the club, though!

“…Anyway, you’re doing well as captain, huh?” I said.

“…The team isn’t really organized enough to call me the captain, though.” Totsuka gave an awkward *ah-ha-ha*. I guess you could call that half modesty and half truth. But for a long time, the captain had been taking the initiative to do independent practice. His actions had most certainly spoken to the club members more than any words had.

This is fundamentally the way a club captain should be. I thought a certain other club captain would also do well to learn from his example… Well, she can strike the right balance the way she is. It’s fine.

Then the words *club captain* struck me with an idea.

I had considered talking to Totsuka as a part of probing into Hayama’s plans. But since my motive there had been impure—I’d just wanted to talk to Totsuka—and also Zaimokuza had gotten in the way, I’d completely forgotten about it…

Well, and besides, I’m interested in Totsuka—whoops, I mean I’m interested in what he’s choosing for his course stream.

“Totsuka. Are you going for arts or sciences?” I asked.

He gave me a blank look, like Bambi just jumped out from behind a tree. “It’s unusual for you to ask a question like that.”

He seemed *really surprised*. “Is it?”

And without hesitation or confusion, Totsuka evenly replied, “Yeah. I kind of get the feeling that you’re always interested in specific things.”

Yeah, well, now that he points it out, that’s true.

Having not proactively engaged in communication with others for many years, I’ve often made sure to set up a reason or opportunity before conversing with someone. I mean, like, if I don’t

come up with a goal to talk, then what I want to say won't come out smoothly. In other words, paradoxically, you can say that loners are useful personnel with heightened goal awareness. Yep, that's how it works.

While I was busy nodding to myself about this, Totsuka said something that was not an answer to my question. "What about you, Hachiman?"

"I'm going for arts."

Normally, if someone responds to my question with another question, I sentence them to a lecture, but when he cutely tilted his head and gazed at me with those big eyes of his, I was forced to answer immediately. If this had been Komachi or Isshiki, I'd have already lectured them and would now be just giving them the answer. Oh no! I do just answer to answer! I'm such a softy!

There was a soft *click* as Totsuka set down his chopsticks and looked up at the sky. During his pensive pause, the cold winter wind whooshed by, toying with his bangs. "Hmm… Then maybe I'll go for arts, too…"

"Ohhh, you will?! …I mean, isn't it a bad idea to decide like that?"

For an instant, the line *Samesies!* played in my head in the Totsuka voice (with bashful gestures), and a heart-dancing encore began bubbling up within me, but I just barely held it back.

"You should think it over more carefully." I cleared my throat, then added, "…Well, if the result's the same either way, then that's not great, either, though."

Totsuka poked his pointer finger to his cheek and flicked a look at my face. *Ummm, if you give me a look like that—it makes me want to be like,* Screw the arts course; let's go into the same grave together! *You know…*

"I am thinking over it carefully, though… You can get into my school of choice with arts, too."

"Ohhh. Well, there are a lot of places where you can choose your subjects, huh?" If he had a proper basis for the decision, then maybe he'd be fine going with either arts or sciences. You can technically also make the decision for arts or sciences based not off the faculty grouping of your school of choice but off the subjects on the entrance exams for your faculty of choice.

For humanities universities, arts get you English and Japanese, plus social studies subjects. For sciences, the most standard

composition for entrance exam subjects is English, math, and then science subjects.

But in recent years, depending on the university and faculty, some places will be more flexible, like you can select your entrance exams in A form or B form or whatever, and there are a lot of places where even in the arts faculty, you can take the entrance exams for math and science subjects if you select them on your form. Furthermore, with national public universities, many will go by the National Center Test and assign five subjects and seven courses or more. So you have to study for everything.

It's easy to make the decision based on the style of your target school. But if you're doing the opposite, there are all sorts of combinations. It would be difficult to predict what Hayama was picking based on this line of reasoning.

"Which school are you going for, Totsuka?"

"Um…I'm thinking about social sciences or sports science at Tokorozawa."

"Ahhh, Tokorozawa, huh?" I knew the school Totsuka was talking about. It's a real-deal famous school, but if you go there, then you'll be isolated in Tokorozawa in Saitama prefecture for four years, where they say you're forced to only eat *juumangoku manjuu* and have the wind speak to you… Saitama is scary…

But anyway, it was great that there was something he wanted so badly that he'd go to the boondocks for it. I would like to not leave Chiba if possible. In fact, I've even decided that the train I'll ride will be the Sobu Line local train.

"It being sports stuff, is that because of your club?" I asked. If his entrance exam subjects were something he had to do, then his motivation for wanting to go to that school would be connected to what he wanted to do. So I should consider from that angle, instead.

Totsuka scratched his cheek a little shyly. "Hmm, it's not really that. It's just that I've spent so long playing tennis, I thought it'd be nice to do something related…"

"I see… So then, did you get a recommendation or something?" He'd been playing tennis for many years, so it seemed to me he deserved some kind of reward. It's hard to keep up rigorous practice at your club while also making sure to study for entrance exams. Besides, since Totsuka was aiming for a school that was popular to begin with, those who were studying from the start to get in would

inevitably have an advantage over those who only got seriously to studying after retiring from their clubs. For someone like me, if the goal was the same, I'd think the less tiring option would be the better one.

But it seemed these cost-benefit analyses were not a part of Totsuka's consideration in the matter, and he laughed cheerfully at my remarks. "Ah-ha-ha, only a handful of people get those. I think it would be impossible, at our school. Even if someone did get a recommendation, I doubt it'd be for a famous university."

"Is that how it works…?" It's true; I'd never heard of our school having strong sports teams. The only thing I could think of would just be that graduate from the judo club I'd met before summer vacation, I guess. I recall he'd gotten into university through a recommendation, but I don't remember hearing which school he went to. In fact, I don't recall hearing that guy's name, either. Still, he struggled at the university he got into, so a recommendation wouldn't necessarily make things easier.

When it comes to entrance exams, it seems an all-or-nothing bet on the general exams is the most efficient way after all.

While I was coming to my conclusions, Totsuka munched on a shrimp dumpling, then suddenly slapped his knee. "Oh, but if you're really good, then you might get in via *selection* from a famous school. There are also places that will do sports self-recommendations."

"*Selection*… I've heard that before." I think if you win at that card game, then your wishes come true, and you become an unlimited girl… Wait, no, wrong English word, that's *selector*. Basically, I think a *selection* is where you take a screening exam as an individual.

Totsuka nodded, but his expression gradually grew more glum. "Yeah, yeah. But the people who take those are aiming for a professional career or the Olympics and stuff. At our school, I think if anyone were to get accepted, it would just be Hayama."

"…Is he that great?"

"I'm just saying if anyone did. It's probably harder than that, though." Totsuka stuck out his tongue to cover his awkwardness, then looked out over to the sports field. Once school was over, the soccer club would be practicing there. "Does Hayama need a sports recommendation? Wouldn't he get in through normal self-recommendation? I mean, he does coordinate the captains' meeting,

too.”

Self-recommendation. The so-called AO entrance, huh…? I think the official name for that was *Ability Optional*, right? Or am I wrong? Well, not like it matters, but since that’s also a thing, adding that in as well weakened the relationship between entrance exam subjects and the arts/science selection even further.

“Hayama’s pretty wild, huh…?” What a trivial, obvious opinion to have come out of my mouth.

“Yeah. He can do anything, and he’s nice, too.”

I’d thought I had a decent grasp of what Hayato Hayama’s level was, but I hadn’t filtered him through his club activities. Totsuka probably saw him a certain way because he was also in the position of being an athletic team captain.

Totsuka’s chopsticks paused right there as he smiled awkwardly. “Speaking of wild…those rumors are wild, too.”

“Ah yeah, that…”

Unsurprisingly, Totsuka had picked up on the rumors, too. “When I heard it, I was a little surprised. I thought the one Hayama liked was Miura. We did talk about that stuff during summer vacation…”

As Totsuka said, during that summer trip in Chiba Village, Totsuka had been there listening when Hayama had said the initial. And it was true that Miura’s first name also had the initial *Y*.

But during gym class, Tobe hadn’t touched on that possibility at all. Tobe was a part of their clique, and he’d seen both of them a lot, so he had to have a real sense that there was no way that was it.

So then who did that refer to?

“Hachiman? What’s wrong?”

When I heard my name, I realized that there was tension between my eyes. I forced my eyebrows up and down and relaxed my cheeks, too. “Oh, I was just wondering who it is, too. There are a lot of people whose names start with *Y*…” I mean, Yoshiteru Zaimokuza, for one. Or if we’re betting on a long shot, how about Yamato? You could even put a *Y* on Isshiki’s name and call her Wairoha Isshiki. Wait, no, *wairo* is bribery. And that’s the initial *W*!

And with those inane thoughts, I chased away the ones I didn’t want.

As we were talking, the bell signaling the end of lunchtime rang. We had to get back to the classroom by the next bell. *Damn, I*

totally haven't finished my lunch. I hurriedly shoved down my bread and washed it down with MAX Coffee, and then I saw Totsuka, who'd already finished his smaller meal, slowly get to his feet.

Then he called out loud toward the tennis court. "That's it, guys! See you again after school!"

The tennis club members swung their rackets at him in response, and Totsuka waved back at them. I watched, sort of stunned. I dunno, I just hadn't ever seen Totsuka being so proactive and energetic before.

"…Doesn't seem very me, huh?" Seemingly remembering I was there, Totsuka blushed shyly and watched my reaction.

"Oh, no, it's not that…" Surprise wasn't the only reason my words had gotten stuck in my throat. I'd simply been entranced. This had stirred my heart more than any other gesture I'd seen from Totsuka before. "Uh, I just didn't know you could be…captain-y like that. I'm a little surprised." I was struggling to put the feeling into words, so I stumbled a bit

Totsuka seemed to find that funny and laughed out loud. "There's tons you don't know, huh, Hachiman?"

"Yeah, tons." Thanks to his smile, I found my own lips widening as well.

Totsuka looked up at the sky, bending his fingers as he started counting. "You didn't know about the tennis club or about sports recommendations."

"Yeah, thanks for telling me," I said.

Totsuka responded with a little nod and bent another finger. "Or…about Hayama's course selection, or that rumor," he said.

I had no response for that. I still had no clue about Hayama's course stream selection, and even asking Tobe and Zaimokuza about it obliquely hadn't gotten me much. The end result was that I was just pretending that rumor didn't exist.

When I didn't say anything, a silence fell between us. The only things that could be heard were the cold wind blowing through and the noises coming from inside the school building.

Totsuka sucked in a deep breath of winter air, then gently lowered his last finger, his pinkie, and squeezed his fist tight. "Or… about me."

His words made a mysterious sort of sense to me.

Totsuka ran a hand through his wind-tossed hair to smooth it down, then puffed his chest up boldly. This was a Totsuka I didn't know, one I was seeing for the first time. "I'm doing a good job, aren't I? …Even if I'm not that reliable," he added with a bit of a shy smile. That was a gesture from the Saika Totsuka I'd thought I knew.

Maybe this was the first proper look I'd ever taken at the boy named Saika Totsuka, without affectation, excess, or deficiency. Though I'm sure I'm still not at all capable of understanding him.

But that was exactly why I wanted to know him better.

"…No, that's not true. I rely on you, too. I still don't really know, but yeah… I think I do," I said, getting up to take a step toward him.

Totsuka nodded bashfully but also with strength.

I think Totsuka has always been waiting for me to approach him like this.

Slowly peeling off the masks and shaving off the excess, for the first time, you face each other.

Sometimes you have someone who you've never really bothered with. You're so indifferent that you don't care, and you can say whatever the hell you want. Then, like gently and slowly shaving off cuticles, like play biting, that indifference slowly crumbles away.

Totsuka is no angel… A little devil? Or perhaps an archangel… No, or a fallen angel?

Whatever. Totsuka is Totsuka.

6

Gallantly, **Haruno Yukinoshita** departs into the darkness.

In the end, I didn't really hear any good information about Hayama's course stream choice over the course of the next few days, and all I heard was a jumble of remarks from my classmates.

Seen from the outside, Hayama's clique seemed no different from normal, too. Miura and maybe also Tobe were cautious of what seemed to be at the core of things, but they never touched it. Yet they still avoided ever blatantly acting distant, either.

There wasn't much time left to resolve the request we'd gotten from Miura.

The submission deadline for the career path questionnaire was at the end of this month. The marathon was immediately before that. I had to find some kind of answer on Hayama's choice by then.

All I knew right now was that Hayama hadn't told anyone what he'd picked. That was it. So for now, I was forced to spend some time gathering evidence to help me deduce it.

I'd spent a few days doing that, and then the marathon was looming at the beginning of the following week. It was after school.

I observed how things were going in the classroom, then went out into the hallway. The situation hadn't changed, and things were dragging on. Yuigahama seemed to be doing her own investigation, as she was proactively chatting with Hayama in the brief window before he and Tobe went to their club.

So then it should be fine for me to head to the clubroom without her that day. I left the classroom, walking along the hallway to the special-use building alone.

Ahead, there was Miss Hiratsuka, beckoning. "Going to your club?"

"Yeah, basically."

"I see. Perfect. I was just thinking I'd go over there," she said,

and she pointed toward the special-use building before walking on ahead of me, prompting me to come. Apparently, she meant to walk and talk.

If she meant to come to the clubroom, could this be about work…? Though I felt my spirit draining away, there would be no point in struggling now. I would obediently follow.

"Do you have free time after school tomorrow?" she asked.

"Yeah, basically." I had nothing resembling a plan. At most there was just that request from Miura, but it wasn't like I had any concrete plans of action.

To be blunt, I was at a dead end.

Even if I inclined my ears toward the conversations around me (stalking) or closely watched what Hayama did (stalking) or tried waiting for the right moment to get Hayama alone (stalking), everything was a swing and a miss (strikeout). Considering when the submission deadline for the career path questionnaire was, it wasn't just three outs—game set was only a matter of time.

I don't know if Miss Hiratsuka was satisfied by my answer, or she'd assumed all along that I had no plans, but she dispassionately continued, "There's a career path consultation event tomorrow, but we don't have quite enough people…though the student council is also working hard on it for us."

Hey, she only seems to be playing around! But she's actually doing her job, huh!

"…And so Isshiki picked you out. She wants you to help with the work."

Is the order a Hachibun? But hearing the word *work* does not make my heart *hop-hop*…

"But why would you come all this way for me…?" Isshiki spent so much damn time in the clubroom, she could have said then.

"Because it's an official order from the student council. Well, if she's coming to get permission from the teacher-advisor, then that's progress. I don't know what she means by it, but your club is perfect for personnel they can use freely without causing problems. It makes sense," Miss Hiratsuka said with a nod. As a teacher, she felt she was personally seeing real growth from Isshiki.

…No, this is actually like a scheme from Isshiki. She's going through the teacher so we can't refuse. But if Isshiki is doing her best, then we could help her a little.

"Well, if that's what's going on, sure… But what are you doing

for this event?"

"Basically, it's for asking how to handle entrance exams. Think of it as an opportunity to ask some older students more specific details."

"Entrance exams? Isn't this kinda early? Why do it at this time of year…?"

"I did talk about this in homeroom." The teacher got a bit of a sulky look.

…Oh yeah, I get the feeling she did talk about that. Maybe I kind of ignored it… Ah-ha-ha…

I pasted on a polite smile to mollify her, and Miss Hiratsuka breathed a short sigh as if to say, *Oh well.* "It's because our school also has the International Curriculum. There are kids here looking to study abroad. They need to start preparing early, even if it is earlier than regular schools."

"Study abroad…" *Right, you don't have to stay in Japan to pursue your studies.* It wasn't something I'm really familiar with, so it hadn't occurred to me, but some people will go to universities overseas. One of the unique features of our school is its International Curriculum. That could make students more likely to be aware of the option of studying abroad.

Studying abroad, huh…? Wow… I actually had been out of the country before, at least, but I'd never thought about living elsewhere.

You wouldn't decide that on a whim. So people who were seeking to study abroad may have already made the decision a while back. "So are there actually a lot of people who have already decided on that? I heard some people already submitted the questionnaire…"

"No, not really. Just a few. We've set the deadline at the end of the month. Most people will submit these things at the last minute… Ah, but Hayama did come to submit his."

"Huh…" I got lucky for his name to come up. I didn't even have to construct a whole conversation for the sake of asking.

But right as I was thinking that, Miss Hiratsuka gave me a sharp look out of the corner of her eye. "I won't tell you. That's private information."

"…I…i-i-i-i-it's not like I wanted to know anyway!"

"I know how you feel. It's natural to be curious what schools your peers are going for. And it's something fun to talk about up

until entrance exams get serious." She smiled nostalgically, then continued. "And with students like Hayama and Yukinoshita, even some of the teachers are curious. Their performance is related to the school's achievement."

"Huh, so there's expectations, huh…?"

"You're just as good when it comes to your arts grades, but… You just don't get as much attention," she said, puffing up her cheeks slightly with some indignance. But there's nothing you can do about that. I've never once built a good relationship with a teacher. That means that even though I get good grades on exams, my grades on report cards are somewhat lacking. I seriously can't understand why middle school teachers love the loud and mischievous (lol) types…

As I was recalling unpleasant memories, Miss Hiratsuka suddenly stopped. Swishing back her long hair, she looked me straight in the eye. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm doing arts," I answered immediately.

Miss Hiratsuka gave a tiny shake of her head. "No, no, I mean further in the future."

"Househusband."

The moment I answered that, I got a smack on the head for it. Miss Hiratsuka put a hand on her hip as if to say *Good grief* and gave me a look. This was not her normal overbearing attitude—she was somehow big sister–like. Awkward.

Then she sighed. "Look at reality."

I-I'm not running away from reality, I'm just facing my ideals, okay…? But her gaze was a little too sincere for me to say that.

Scratching my chin, I turned away to answer, "I haven't made up my mind yet. Besides, it's not like I want some kind of specialist or research job. Art won't be a problem."

"Nothing you're interested in?"

"If there's something I'm interested in, I'll make it a hobby. If you make it your job, won't that just make your life harder?"

Life is hard!! Or I think that's what they said in an ad for the anime *Jinsei*. It was like, *Life is so hard, goddammit, man.*

"…That's very like you. Well, I can see the logic. If you're asking if your choice of faculty will have a major influence on your future, that's not true for the majority of people." Folding her arms, she looked out the window. "Some people go from science universities into publishing houses, and other people study social

science and go straight into entertainment. Some people even choose language universities and travel all over the world. Students at law school don't necessarily all wind up as lawyers and prosecutors. Even I didn't go to school for education. Although none of this applies to doctors, lawyers, or research careers, though…"

"Yeah, and pharmacists and stuff…," I said, and Miss Hiratsuka nodded.

It's not like there's a direct connection between your faculty and your future profession. I don't know where my dad graduated from or what his job is now. Wait, that is a direct connection…

The division between arts and sciences is so approximate anyway these days, you hear about the "interdisciplinary viewpoint" and whatnot, where companies will deliberately seek out talent from other backgrounds. Ultimately, a lot will depend on the qualifications and skills of the individual. For example, I believe communication skills, communication skills, and also communication skills as well as communication skills are necessary in society. Awww man, I don't want to think about getting a job.

"But still, as your teacher, I should tell you…," Miss Hiratsuka said, clapping me on the shoulder, "there's no need to decide your whole future right now. Transferring schools or departments, or going to one college while studying to get into another are all options, if you want. Changing professions is also possible. This is nothing more than one opportunity of many to choose."

"I see."

I'm sure there are countless opportunities to choose your path, whether it be in higher education or in your career. Meaning marriage is one of those opportunities to choose! I don't really know if there will be an opportunity! For either of us! But work with me here!

Ultimately, this just means there will be a *chance* to choose again. There's no guarantee you can take back your failures. It's pretty common to fail again and open the wound further.

"…But isn't it dangerous to blow your first choice?" I asked.

"Mm-hmm. So what a teacher can do for you is increase your number of options… And also reduce them."

"*Should* you be reducing them…?"

Miss Hiratsuka leveled me with a rather serious look. "Of course, the student is the one who decides. All we can do is offer advice. And my advice right now is…give up on your dream of

being a househusband.”

Ahhh, there goes my option…

Eventually, the long hallway came to an end, and we approached the stairs. I was going on up, but Miss Hiratsuka went to turn the corner. She wasn’t going to follow me to the clubroom. Having informed me of Isshiki’s request, it seemed her business was now done.

With a casually raised hand, she left me and started walking off. I answered that with a bit of a bow.

Then she stopped, turning just her head back toward me. “… What if you could get a teaching position at university? That might actually be a good fit for you.”

“I’d never wanna be a teacher. I’d have to deal with students like me, after all,” I answered with a shrug.

Miss Hiratsuka smiled wryly. “True. I can sympathize with that.”

…What a thing to say after all our time together.

Bowing one more time, I watched her go.

X X X

When I opened the door to the clubroom, my eyes immediately met Yukinoshita’s.

She had a blanket over her knees and held a paperback with a cat-patterned book cover on it that seemed to be a favorite, but her eyes were on the door.

Yuigahama wasn’t there yet, and Yukinoshita was alone. She offered a little smile. “Hello.”

“’Sup,” I replied, and Yukinoshita snapped her book shut and stood. Then, as usual, she began making tea.

Setting out the Western- and Japanese-style teacups as the water boiled, she turned to me. “You’re a little late today.”

“Miss Hiratsuka asked me to handle some stuff…”

As she was putting the tea leaves into the pot, Yukinoshita cocked her head. “What was the request?”

“She said there was this career path consultation tomorrow, and the student council wants some help.”

“Ah. The student council… I’ll open up my schedule, then.”

“Yeah… Uhhh, it’s fine with just me, though.”

She said that so offhandedly, I just replied normally before I realized it. Seeing as how I was the only one Isshiki had asked for, it would probably be mostly simple labor, like setting up chairs and stuff. It didn't seem necessary to bother Yukinoshita and Yuigahama about it.

Despite what I said, though, without any particular deliberation at all, Yukinoshita immediately answered, "I don't really mind… It's not like there's anything else for me to do."

"Well, that's true…" I was stuck, and it wasn't like Yukinoshita had any ideas, either. I was pretty embarrassed after my declaration to Miura, but this was the reality. Not to mention, maybe doing something would make Yukinoshita feel better.

After that, both of us stared wordlessly at the hot-water kettle, and as we waited for the water to boil, the door was smacked open.

"Yahallo!"

"Hello, hellooo."

That characteristic greeting was familiar to me.

First, Yuigahama. And then the next one to step into the clubroom was Ebina.

"Hello, Ebina," said Yukinoshita.

"Hey, there. Haven't seen you since New Year's."

"Take a seat." Yukinoshita offered a chair, and Ebina thanked her and sat down.

As Yukinoshita was preparing tea for the guest as well, I gave Yuigahama a look asking for an explanation. *Why is she here…?*

Yuigahama nodded back at me. "Okay, so we were talking about, like, asking people who might know about Hayama's course stream, right?"

"Yeah."

"So I asked Hina about it, too; I figured we might as well all think about it together. Right, Hina?" Yuigahama turned the discussion to her.

"I hope I can be useful, though." Ebina nodded without any confidence.

Well, it wasn't a bad idea. In terms of her relationship to Hayama and to Miura, her position was pretty close. She would be hard to talk to if it were me or Yukinoshita alone, but going through Yuigahama made it a possibility.

And besides, behind her *fujoshi* mask, she held something unknown to me. Even if she wasn't quite correct, she might direct

us to some kind of hint.

But Ebina's expression was clouded. Even her glasses were clouded thanks to the tea from Yukinoshita.

"Hayato's course stream, huh…? But, well, I haven't really heard anything about it, either. And plus, Hayato is good at both fields, so I don't know if I can say anything."

"Ahhh, I thought so. Of course…," Yuigahama agreed, shoulders slumping. Well, as long as you don't have lopsided grades like me, narrowing down your future course based on your academics is difficult.

Maybe the idea of avoiding what you're bad at is a negative one, but it works for me. Maybe not for everyone, though.

Leaning my cheek on my hand, I sighed quietly.

Ebina was still considering the matter—then she seemed to hit on something, opening her mouth. "Oh, but he has said something about the type of occupation."

"Wait, what? He did?" Yuigahama asked.

Ebina nodded. "This was a while back, but during the workplace tour, I think he said, like, media or a foreign-owned company?"

"Ohhh, you're right; I think he did." Yuigahama clapped her hands.

Now that she mentioned it, I do kind of get the feeling he said something along those lines, back then. But both "media" and "foreign-owned" were too broad. I doubt media is really easier to go for if you do arts, and "foreign-owned" applied to a whole range of businesses. It would be impossible to calculate backward from that.

"But that could have just been out of curiosity. It's a little weak to use as a basis," Yukinoshita said, putting her hand to her chin. She was right. I mean, for that workplace tour, we'd gone for observation at a totally unrelated IT tech type of place.

But Ebina was aware of that, too. "Yeah, I think so, too. Plus…" She trailed off a moment. Her gaze was pointed toward a corner of the clubroom, not looking at any of us.

"Plus?" Yuigahama prompted her to continue.

Ebina gave her head a little shake. "Plus, we all ended up going to the same place anyway, so I doubt it'd be useful information!" she said, ending the sentence with unwarranted energy.

"Ah, yeahhh." Yuigahama nodded along, but I wasn't nodding.

What was Ebina actually trying to say there?

Yukinoshita folded her legs the other way and asked Ebina another question. “He hasn’t said anything else?”

“I don’t really remember anything that seems relevant…” Ebina tilted her head, searching her memory, but her eyes jumped right over to me. “But, like, wouldn’t Hikitani know better when it comes to details like that?”

“Huh? Me?” I pointed at myself without thinking.

“It’s true; Hikki does watch him a l—”

Ebina bounded out of her seat, cutting Yuigahama off. “Look! See! It’s that special gay eye conversation! It’s Hayahachi!”

“No, it’s not.”

What the heck is “special gay eye conversation”? Is she a wannabe Newtype or something? That woman! Step on her ships with a Gelgoog!

“Enough with that humor.”

“Ah, ah-ha-ha…”

“Agh…”

Yuigahama put on a strained smile, while Yukinoshita put a hand to her temple as if she had a headache and sighed.

Ebina was still doing her frightening *fujoshi* chuckle, but then she suddenly pushed up the frames of her glasses with a finger. The lenses flashed in the light, and I couldn’t tell where she was looking anymore.

“…Well, I’m not entirely joking, though,” she added. The words were so small, I just about missed them.

Before I could ask what she really meant by that, I heard the scrape of Ebina’s chair sliding on the floor as she leaned forward with enthusiasm. “Come on, I wanna have a passionate discussion about the possibilities of Hayahachi!”

“No way, no way in hell…”

“Aw, too bad. Right, then I should get going. I’ll see you later, okay? Yui, Yukinoshita.” And with that, Ebina stood up, heading for the clubroom door.

“Ah, yeah. Thanks,” said Yuigahama.

“If there’s anything else, I’d appreciate if you could tell us,” said Yukinoshita.

“Sure. See you, then.” Waving in reply to the two other girls, Ebina left the clubroom.

I looked at the door for a bit, then sighed. “Guess we need a little longer to get an estimate.”

“Yes, it seems so.” Yukinoshita nodded, then reached out for her now-cold tea. Yuigahama had her mug in one hand and her phone in the other.

“…I’m going to the washroom.” With that one remark, I left the clubroom.

Not much time had passed since Ebina had left the Service Club room. She wouldn’t have gone that far. I wanted to ask her some more details—well, actually, I wanted to ask her what she meant by what she’d said.

Most of all, I surmised the reason she had not said good-bye to me was because she still had something to talk about herself. Or she’d just forgotten me. If it was the latter, that’s actually kinda like bullying, y’know? Invisible beings and stuff—if this were *Another*, someone’d be dead.

Still pondering the matter, I turned a corner to see Ebina was indeed ahead and walking very, very slowly.

Hearing my hurried footsteps in the hallway, Ebina turned around. “Listen, this is pointless.” That was the first thing out of her mouth. She spoke just as if she’d anticipated that I would come following her.

“What is?”

“Investigating him like this. Hayato doesn’t slip up that easily.”

I came to a stop, and her look hit me through her lenses. It was cold, not like Ebina’s usual expressions. Or maybe this hardness was who she really was. I’d felt it from her before, during the incident on the school field trip.

With a casual shrug, I broke eye contact. “…I figured. But we kinda talked big to Miura—we can’t not do it.”

“Hmm…”

After that, all words evaporated.

There was nobody in the hallway but me and Ebina. When the both of us said nothing, it went completely silent. The only sound was the wind rattling the windows.

Standing there in the middle of an awkward silence, scratching my head, I figured out what I wanted to ask Ebina. I cleared my throat, then opened my mouth. “But let me ask you—are you okay with that?”

“With what?”

“I mean, no matter how this plays out, things can’t be the same as they’ve always been.”

“No, I don’t think that’s true,” Ebina answered instantly, cutting me off. “I’m sure Hayama will manage to avoid that. I think Yumiko understands that, too. I don’t think a class change will collapse everything.” Every word out of her mouth was vague, but there was a ring to her voice that sounded like certainty.

“I see. You really trust him, huh?”

“That’s not it… I just think Hayato will probably choose a way that won’t hurt anyone. It’s not that I trust him exactly. It’s just a selfish wish.” Ebina stuck out her tongue and smiled.

I think before I never would have doubted what Ebina said. I think I would’ve assumed Hayato Hayama was that sort of guy.

But now, it was different. It wasn’t something clear or defined, but that hazy unease was lurking in the depths.

That’s what made me want to ask.

“C’mon, why do you think that?”

“…Because that’s who Hayato is. He meets everyone’s expectations.” Looking away from me, Ebina smiled one more time. There was nothing charming in that smile; it was ice-cold. The corners of her mouth were pulled up just slightly.

Seeing it so close, I thought better of replying. In the slight moment of silence that it gave rise to, Ebina hopped a step away from me and raised her hand up just slightly. “I’m going to head home, then.”

“Y-yeah…,” I somehow managed to say, then watched Ebina’s back grow distant.

I still hadn’t arrived at anything that really seemed like the right answer.

Something about it just felt wrong. Pondering the true nature of this feeling, I turned back to the clubroom.

When I happened to look up at the sky through the hallway window, I saw crimson and indigo mixed together in the dimming winter sky.

This sky would eventually turn to complete darkness.

It would betray no one’s expectations—the matter that didn’t even need to be considered. It was something to be taken for granted.

X X X

After Ebina's visit, nobody else came, the club time came to an end, and I headed home.

Even if I announced my arrival at home at the door, there would be no reply. A couple of corporate slaves would not be coming back at this hour, and Komachi would have gone to cram school or be in her room.

Going up the stairs, I entered the pitch-dark living room and flipped the light switch. *Click.*

The lights flared on.

And then, in the apparently empty room, a figure hazily appeared.

"Ngk! You scared me…"

It was Komachi, leaning her face on her hand and zoning out.

Noticing the pathetic sound I made, Komachi snapped out of it, turned to me, and smiled sweetly. "…Oh, Bro. Welcome home."

"Y-yeah, hi…"

I tossed my coat and bag on the sofa and turned on the heater. Komachi must have been zoning out like that for a long time. The living room was freezing.

"What's wrong, Komachi?" I asked, taking a seat on the sofa.

Komachi got a sweet, shy smile on her face, then dramatically slumped facedown on the table. "K-Komachi really can't anymore…," she said tearfully, taking her head in her hands. "*Sob*… Komachi's gonna fail these exams and ruin her life… Both the children of the Hikigaya family will become shut-ins, and all the neighbors will giggle when they talk about her… I just know my life is about to be over!!"

"Uh, I'm not a shut-in, though…," I pointed out, but Komachi wasn't listening at all. She mussed her hair into a wild mess, then once again flopped down onto the table.

Ahhh, she's at it again… Exactly like the end of last year…

Well, there's marriage blues, there's maternity blues, and Tail Blue. I guess Komachi's sort of Blue is entrance exams. That *sentai* team would also include a Red (the state of your grades) and a Black (the reputation of your employer). Yikes, what a terrible crime-fighting team…

But anyway, managing Komachi was something I did have a basic grasp on. "Why not take a break? And think about fun stuff." I was going by the big bro manual, but Komachi didn't react. She'd immediately leaped on that before…

Finding this strange, I leaned on the sofa and turned back to Komachi. She was hunched over, lips pouting slightly, and her hands were clenched in weak fists on the table. "…I can't have fun right now."

There was no humor in her tone like before, but her sulkiness reminded me of when she was little.

"Did something happen?"

"No," she replied shortly. But that taciturnity actually communicated to me that there was something she wanted to say.

I just stayed silent and waited for her to continue. About a full minute went by. Aside from the second hand on the wall clock, the only thing making sound was the cars going by outside.

Eventually, Komachi sighed and capitulated. "…It's, like, even when I take a break, like before I go to bed or when I'm eating, all I can think about is, like, *I haven't done this* or *I haven't finished that*," Komachi put the words together, one by one. The whole time, she never looked at me, eyes down on her lightly clenched hands. "And, like…*What if I don't make it…* or *What if I fail?*" Her fists squeezed tight.

In an attempt to be relaxing, I spoke as slowly as I could. "You don't have to stress over it that much. You already got into a private school."

"I don't wanna go there." Komachi jerked her face away from me, so I couldn't see her expression. But I heard her speak, hesitating all the while. "Paying a lot of money for a place I don't wanna go would be dumb…and I don't wanna do that to Dad."

Our parents both work, so we weren't terribly strapped for cash. Frankly, I think they anticipated paying tuition for private school. But I don't think Komachi was talking about money.

She felt bad for Dad, huh? Normally, she treats him like a pain in her butt, but she finally showed some concern for him now.

I don't think even Komachi sincerely dislikes our dad.

Thanks to the pressure from entrance exams right now, something very close to her hidden true feelings was slipping out.

"And I don't wanna hear people saying, like, I failed…"

Her voice was trembling.

Komachi was cheerful, full of smiles, and a good girl. She was considerate not only for the household but also for her big brother. I'm sure she acts cheerful like that at school, too.

But she had indeed distanced herself from her friends during

winter vacation. I'm sure there was conflict and pressure in her social relationships that I can't possibly know about.

The more cheerful you are, the bigger the difference when that brightness is lost. Private high schools had already started announcing acceptances, so the passing or failing of her classmates would be coming up a lot in her classroom. And an offhand comment with a sharp edge could stab her right in the heart, even if she'd normally shake it off.

That would make you want to distance yourself from people, from reality.

Komachi's faltering words trailed off, and then instead of words, I heard something like a sniff.

I got up from the sofa and sat down opposite her. "Well, high school entrance exams are important. If you blow it here, you'll be pretty behind, and it gets kind of hard to face your middle school friends."

"Yeah…," Komachi replied, but she didn't sound like she really got what I was saying. Maybe she was hearing this stuff at school and cram school—maybe our parents were even saying it.

But I chose to continue. "But university entrance exams are more important, and getting a job is probably even more important. And each time, you'll probably lose friends no matter what. If you blow it, yikes."

"Y-yeah…," she said, sounding kind of confused.

But I replied to her with a fair amount of certainty, "But it'll be okay."

That made Komachi look up. Her eyes were a little wet and somewhat surprised. That look reminded me of when she was small, and I couldn't help but smile.

"Let me put it another way: As long as you balance the accounts at the end, it's okay. It's just like baseball playoffs. Going to a good high school and university is like the advantage you get from ranking first place in a season. It puts you ahead, but it's not like that decides everything."

Once, there was a team that was in third for the season, but then postseason, they started winning fast, and in the end, they even won the honor of being number one in Japan. You never know what's going to happen. Maybe it'll be just like that one playoff game, when they were losing and a pinch hitter knocked a dribbler to third for a base hit that led to a rally. Life and baseball are both a

drama without a script.

I was going to make a passionate speech about this, but Komachi didn't really care about baseball, and I don't know if she even listened through the whole thing. She was facing me but not answering.

Hmm, my big bro radar is telling me this isn't the lecture Komachi wants.

Not really knowing what else I should say, I scratched my head and just said what came to mind. "Well, anyway… If the time comes, I'll manage taking care of you somehow."

"Bro…"

"Supporting one person isn't much different from supporting two. I'll appeal to Mom and Dad with everything I have."

"I wanted you to say you'd get a job…," Komachi said as she gently wiped her eyes and smiled.

"That's a last resort for me… Ah, maybe I shouldn't say this myself, but your big bro is pretty capable. I can manage most things… So don't worry." I reached out to Komachi's head and gave it a pat, then mussed her hair around.

"Listen, Bro, when Komachi sees you…" Putting her hand over mine, eyes still a little wet, she met my gaze. She paused a moment, then sighed like she'd lost her energy. "All this worrying is starting to feel ridiculous…" Then she gave my hand a little slap to make it go away.

"…Glad to hear it."

You show my little sister just a little bit of kindness, and this is what you get… Oh, that side of her is cute, too, though? Hmm, but it's a little different from the cuteness Big Bro was hoping for, you know…

"Agh, enough of this. Okay, back to studying." Totally back to normal, Komachi stood with a scrape of her chair and began striding out of the living room.

But when her hand touched the doorknob, she stopped flat. "Thanks," she murmured, then swept out of the living room, thumping the door shut.

Through the door, all I could hear was the sound of her slippers pattering across the floor a bit faster than usual.

X X X

After school the next day, Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, and I went to the meeting room.

This was for what Miss Hiratsuka had asked me about the day before, to help the student council and set up the career path consultation. Though I'd said already that I would be enough, they'd come to the conclusion that there was nothing else to do anyway. *The three of us should just get it done fast together!* they'd said, and now here we were.

I hadn't come to this meeting room since the cultural festival—well, planning the cultural festival, technically.

I touched the door to find the meeting room was already unlocked. Isshiki and the student council were probably already there. When I knocked, someone drawled, "Come iiiin." When I opened the door, Isshiki was standing by the window. She turned around.

"Ah, there you are!" As if to say, *You're late!* she pattered over to me and grabbed my sleeve to tug at it. But when she discovered the two behind me, she gracefully bowed. "And thank you to you two as well!"

"Yahallo, Iroha-chan!"

"What should we do?"

Yuigahama offered a friendly reply to her bow, while Yukinoshita looked around the room.

I also took a look around and found it still in its default state. The tables were laid out in a long, thin square, with the chairs lined up in an orderly fashion.

"We're setting up for the career path consultation, so we have to rearrange things a bit. Also, us student councilors are sort of, like, observers for that or offering help where it's needed."

"Agh, it looks like it'll be pretty time-consuming," I said.

Isshiki's shoulders dropped. "Yeah, really. Apparently, this is also the student council's job… This is, like, nothing but chores…"

"Uh, that's what student council is…"

"Nobody told me… Agh, if a certain *someone* hadn't told me to be the president…" Isshiki shot me a rapid sequence of very deliberate-looking glares.

"Don't be obnoxious… At least you're doing your job. Even with all the complaining."

"…W-well, I mean. It *is* my job." Isshiki twisted around like she was uncomfortable, jerking her face away. Then she cleared her

throat and flapped the printouts in her hands. “A-anyway! Please move the chairs and tables and make six individual booths using the partitions. You and the vice president handle the heavy lifting, please.”

I nodded, mentally doing a sideways peace sign and going *Capisce!*

Isshiki nodded back at me, next looking over to Yukinoshita and Yuigahama. “And the girls, please handle the chairs. We’re putting one on the *tutor* side and two on the student side. And if you’re done with that, then please make some tea for the *tutors*.” Still examining the printouts, Isshiki gave further instructions. She was surprisingly brisk about it, and you might have even thought she knew what she was doing. When she gave orders, the clerk with the braided pigtails and glasses nodded.

Meanwhile, one of us seemed confused. Of course, it was Yuigahama.

“Chuuta?” Yuigahama repeated the English word Isshiki had used. “…Like a mouse?”

“It’s not the name of a pet…” It’s not like Nyanta or Hamuzou or Ebizou or Kikuzou.

While I was wondering how I should explain this, Yukinoshita readily stepped forward. “A *tutor* is someone who offers advice and academic support. In this case, I suppose they’re here to answer your questions.”

“That’s right,” said Isshiki. “Aside from the teachers, we’ve invited some graduates, as well as some third-years who have already been accepted through recommendation.”

“Graduates…” Yukinoshita scowled at the words.

What a coincidence, I think I’m imagining exactly the same thing. Often, the worse your bad feeling about something is, the more accurate that feeling is.

“All right, I have to go get the people who will be in the tutor role, so please handle the rest, Vice President,” Isshiki said, and she left the meeting room. Under the instructions of the second-in-command, we continued setting things up.

While I was carrying in the partitions with the vice president, he turned to me. “Sorry, thanks for the help. We just needed people for setting up the venue.”

“Ah, it’s totally fine. At least we know what the task is here.” Before, for the Christmas event, we hadn’t even decided on what we

would do, and it had turned into a disaster. It seemed to me things had improved quite a bit, compared with then—both in terms of Isshiki's motivation and the awkwardness among the student council. And also, in our relationship.

It didn't matter what the catalyst was—if we could carry the heavy things together, bit by bit, then we could change the way things were among all of us.

We moved the tables and lined up the partitions, and then all that was left was a couple of tasks on the girls' end. We'd handled our work pretty efficiently, and there was still time left before the event was scheduled to start.

Then I discovered someone who must have come a little earlier—loitering at the meeting room entrance and checking inside. Each time she went back and forth in front of the entrance, her familiar ponytail swayed.

I think her name was Honda, no, Suzuki…or was it Yamaha? I swear it was something motorcycle-like. She looks like a delinquent; it totally gives you that bike vibe. Bike, bike…bike, Kawasaki, bike? Yeah, Kawasaki is probably right.

Kawasaki seemed to be unsure whether she should come in or not, so I decided to call out to her. "Hey, it's gonna be a bit."

"…Huh."

When I addressed her, she twitched and froze up. Her reply to me was very brief and curt. *She never changes, huh…?*

But I'd feel bad if she came all this way just to stand there and wait the whole time. So I decided to help her kill time until we were all set up. "So you're here for the career thing, huh?"

"B-basically…," she replied, acting kind of flustered. When she reacts like this, she reminds you of a normal girl, though. Someone scary like her, you'd never expect her to diligently attend an event like this—older guys would get a good impression from that, uh-huh.

Well, since we're here, maybe I'll try asking Kawasaki about her future, too. Dunno if it'll be useful as reference, though. "So then what are you doing after high school?"

"Huh? Me? I…I'm thinking a national public humanities school."

"Detailed but also vague…," I said. For someone so apparently close to deciding the school she wanted, she was trailing off and sounding very worried.

Kawasaki gave me a look with half-lidded eyes. “You got a problem with that?” I could almost hear the unspoken *ya punk?*

“Nope. No problems here!” I reflexively straightened my posture. *You can’t dial back that sharpness just a bit, huh…? No problems here, no punks here, no monks here. Please dial back that real-life Monk-class aura. Bet she could fire off Multifists…*

“But if you’ve already decided, why’d you have to come?” I asked her.

“…My grades aren’t the best, so I just wanted to ask about that.” She was curt, but I could tell she wasn’t confident. It seemed she was unwavering in her choice of national public.

Ah, right. I remember she had a lot of siblings. Every household has their own stuff going on.

Every family will have their circumstances. That’s probably true for Hayama and Yukinoshita, too. In Kawasaki’s case, it would be her multiplicity of siblings. That’s why she was thinking ahead, trying to go to a public school. Her little sister was still in preschool, after all. It’d be best for Kawasaki to go for public school. She’s a good big sister, really. Night and day compared with a certain other big sister…

“Oh yeah, so is your sister doing good?” I asked. “Um, Mii-chan?”

“Huh? Who’s that supposed to be?” Kawasaki glared at me.

H-hey, I just got her name wrong here… Geez, sister complex… But what was her name again? …Haa-chan? I think that’s what she called me. I’m Hachiman, so it’s Haa-chan. So then Kaa-chan? …No, that’s just “Mommy” in Japanese.

In the process of reasoning by inference, I arrived at a familiar-sounding name and clapped my hands with a start. “Oh, it was Saa-chan.”

Instantly, silence fell. When Kawasaki snapped out of it, she scooted a step back. Face bright red, she snapped back, “Huh?! Why are *you* calling me Saa-chan?! That’s not a name you can use.”

“Ohhh, I get it. It’s Saki, huh?” *That’s why her sister called her Saa-chan. That makes sense.*

But this wasn’t making sense to Kawasaki, and she took another step backward. “H-huh?!”

Quit with the noises. Are you T, born in a temple? Or is it K, because she’s Kawasaki? Wait, it was Kei-chan. “Oh, Kei-chan, Kei-chan. I remember now,” I said.

Kawasaki gave me a sharp glare. “Next time you forget, I’ll smack you.”

“O-okay…” *I can’t say it… I’m pretty vague on Kawa-something’s name, never mind her sister’s, but I can’t say that…*

It seemed talking about her sister softened her up somewhat, though, and her tone did a 180 to something kind and gentle. “Also, um, this is only if you run into her for some reason, but…be nice to Kei-cha…to Keika.”

“Yeah, sure. I doubt I *will* see her, but if I do.”

“Uh-huh…,” she replied, somewhat reserved, and I nodded back at her.

The door to the meeting room opened with a *clack*, and Yuigahama poked her face in. “Hikki, we’re done setting up.” Then she noticed Kawasaki’s presence and called out to her with a wave. “Heyyy!”

Kawasaki did a kind of semi-bow, bobbing her head.

“The career seminar? Come in, come in!” Yuigahama said, beckoning Kawasaki in.

Watching her go, I opened the door to the meeting room all the way. This would make it easier for the other kids coming later to get in.

While I was squatting down to stick in a door stopper, I heard someone talk to me from above.

“Hey, that reminds me, I never asked… About where you’re going.” When I looked back, Kawasaki had turned just her head toward me.

“I’m going for private humanities.”

“Huhhh, humanities, huh?” Kawasaki said like she was disinterested, and then she walked off toward where Yuigahama was beckoning her.

…Well, we were both going for arts. If we were in the same class the following year, maybe I’d run into her sister again. If that happened, then I’d be nice to her.

X X X

After Kawasaki’s arrival, other students started to trickle in. Glancing over at the clock, I saw it was just a bit until the event was to start.

On the other side of the open door, I could hear loud voices chattering in the hallway. Yukinoshita, standing beside me, quietly inclined her ears to listen. Yuigahama also ambled over to us, looking over toward the hallway with curiosity.

I knew this voice, too. Eventually, the owner of that voice entered the meeting along with Iroha Isshiki. Just as I had expected, it was Haruno Yukinoshita. And following beside her was Meguri.

When Haruno found me, she offered a friendly wave. "Ohhh, if it isn't Hikigaya. Hya-hallo!"

"Hi." I bowed my head casually, and Haruno smiled in satisfaction before turning her gaze toward Yukinoshita.

Yukinoshita stood resolute, and the pair's gazes clashed. "… Haruno."

"So you're here, too, huh, Yukino-chan? Good, good, you can get lots of advice from Big Sis," Haruno said teasingly.

Yukinoshita's eyebrows twitched, coming together. *This is about to explode any second… Seriously, you guys, keep this stuff at home…*

Immediately picking up on this dangerous atmosphere, Yuigahama stepped up beside Yukinoshita. "Ohhh, so you're the graduate, Haruno!"

"Yep, yep. They did say they'd offer me something as thanks, so…here I am! ♪" Haruno smiled a very gleeful smile.

Does she just have nothing better to do? Like, does she not have any friends…? I began to suspect, but Haruno was the type of person who would be popular.

It seemed her number of devotees had increased by one that day, too. Isshiki came up right beside her sparkling eyes. "Man, it's *such* a big help to have an amazing graduate like you here!"

"You think? It's no big deal, though?" Haruno said with casual modesty, but her calm smile was confident, even bewitching.

"Oh, no, you're, like, super-cool, Haruno! I totally look up to you. Honestly, sometimes I wanna be like you…"

"Awww, thanks!" Haruno swept up Isshiki into a hug and rubbed her back with aggressive affection. In her arms, Isshiki had a less-than-sincere smirk on.

Ahhh, she's trying to cozy up to an influential character and acquire her know-how, isn't she…?

But this foe was also a formidable one, and Haruno petted Isshiki's hair with an enchanting smile—as if to say she saw right through her amateur calculations.

I didn't need to see that… I very much did not want a second Haruno.

But creepiness is in the eye of the beholder, as Meguri was watching with a bright smile. Her Healing Wave, her fluffy-puff Megu-Megu-Megu☆rin Megurin power, made my heart fairly Megurisshed.

Noticing me looking at her, Meguri gave me a casual wave in greeting as she trotted up to me. "Hikigaya! I don't think I've seen you in a while."

"Uh, yeah… Did they call you in, too?"

"Mm-hmm. I've already gotten an acceptance, thanks to a designated school recommendation."

As we started talking, Yuigahama hopped up to cut in. "What's a…d-designated school recommendation?"

For some reason, Yukinoshita was the one to answer Yuigahama's question. "It's a system where the university offers a framework for recommendation to designated high schools, and those who have fulfilled the selection criteria will be picked out and recommended by the high school. What makes it different from self-recommendation is that the pass rate is quite high."

Meguri nodded along to the explanation. "I knew you'd know all about it, Yukinoshita. You're so informed! Our school has DSRs for some pretty decent universities. If you have really good grades at school, you can get a recommendation." Meguri puffed out her chest proudly with a little smug chuckle. Very charming. *Ahhh, I'm being Megurisshed…*

But this former student council president was more than just fluffy pleasant. When she does something, she does it right. If not, she wouldn't be getting a DSR.

And our oh-so-responsible Meguri glanced over at the clock. It was just a few minutes before the event was planned to start. She ambled over to Isshiki, who was still joking around with Haruno, and said to her, "So what should we do, President?"

"Ah, okay, so you go to the booth at the end, and beside you will be Haru…" Pulled back to reality, Isshiki was in the middle of assigning tasks when Yukinoshita glanced at the clock again.

Yukinoshita said to Haruno, "Can we talk?"

"What is it?"

"There's something I want to ask. And Hikigaya and Yuigahama, too—could I have just a minute?" she said and

beckoned us to a corner of the meeting room. The fact that she was calling us together and asking a question—I basically got what this was about. Yukinoshita had to be planning to ask Haruno about Hayama's course stream choice. Come to think of it, it was true that Haruno had known Hayama the longest of anyone outside of or within the school. I'd say Yukinoshita's idea was reasonable.

When we gathered in the corner of the meeting room so as to avoid gathering attention, Yukinoshita asked her frankly, "Do you have any idea what Hayama has chosen for his course stream?"

Haruno blinked two, three times, perhaps surprised by the question. But she quickly let out a short, scornful laugh. "Hayato's course stream? Why do you want to know that?" Her tone was disinterested but could be taken to mean that she knew something.

Watching her carefully, Yukinoshita repeated her question. "Do you know something?"

Haruno breathed a long, exasperated sigh. "I dunno? I don't care, so I've never asked. I'm sure he's already decided anyway," she replied bluntly. Then she gave Yukinoshita an unpleasant smile. Her eyes were filled with a dark, sadistic shine. "…And you'd know without asking me, Yukino."

"If I knew, I wouldn't be asking you," Yukinoshita replied with the same cold gaze and sharp tone. Her provocative reply made Haruno bring her eyebrows together just a little.

But Haruno immediately hid the reaction. "Think about it yourself," she said, cool and composed without being stern.

"…"

That somehow chiding remark left Yukinoshita speechless. Yuigahama gave Haruno a wide-eyed stare. I was a little surprised, too. I couldn't sense any malice or ill will from her, but there was clearly no goodwill, either, and her tone was too detached to call affectionate.

Haruno immediately stuck out the tip of her tongue and gave another teasingly mean smile. "Here I was thinking you'd begun managing on your own, and now you're relying on others again. It was cute when you were little, but now… Oh, actually. More importantly, what about your course stream choice?"

That question snapped Yukinoshita out of it. Sweeping her hair off her shoulders, she gave Haruno a haughty glare. "I don't think there's any need to tell you."

"Mom asked me, too. We can never quite get the chance to ask,

aside from times like this. You never talk about anything important. Your big sis doesn't know what to do." Haruno put a hand to her cheek with a wry smile. Her manner was joking, but that softness quickly vanished, and she glanced over at me. "…Right, Hikigaya?"

"Uh, well…" I didn't know how to answer when put on the spot. Haruno's piercing eyes captured me and wouldn't let go.

From the corner of my eye, I caught sight of Yukinoshita biting her lip and looking down. "…It's none of your business."

"So cooold! Oh yeah. Hikigaaaya, c'mon, c'mon, you come ask Big Sis about stuff, about all sorts of things… I'll teach you *anything*, okay?" She prodded at my cheek with her finger, examining my face. The chest of her blouse would normally be hidden by her scarf, but now that we were indoors, it was peeking open, and the sweet scent of her perfume wafted too close, too close, too *close*!

"Uhhh, well, I've already decided, so…" Taking a step away to return the distance between us to what it was, I bent myself backward as far as I could go. She puffed up her cheeks in a pout. Guess she didn't like that.

Then, huffing out a bored sigh, she turned to Yuigahama. "Awww. At least I can hear about Gahama-chan's choice."

"I'm an afterthought?!" Yuigahama wailed at receiving such careless treatment, and Haruno giggled.

While this was going on, Meguri and Isshiki came over. They must have come to call for Haruno, since it was about time to start. Of course, some students came over at the very last minute, too, so the meeting room suddenly got very lively.

Then, among those there, I caught sight of Hayama and his friends. He'd probably come accompanying Tobe or Miura, who were with the group. Of course, they noticed our presence. Though we were in a corner, Haruno tended to draw attention as an outsider to our school.

From the entrance area a little ways away, Hayama called out, "Haruno…"

"Oh, it's Hayato." Haruno raised a hand slightly in a little greeting. After that, it was like the stir in the meeting room got just a bit louder. Haruno tilted her head. "Feels like people are looking at me."

"I mean, well, you stand out." I wasn't going to say this out loud, but objectively speaking, Haruno was so pretty, it would be hard to keep your eyes from following her if you saw her out on the

town. In the school environment, she stood out even more.

But Haruno didn't look satisfied to hear me say that. "It feels a little different from that…"

"Ahhh, I know—it's the rumor," Isshiki muttered as if she'd just remembered.

That made Meguri react. "The rumor! It's kind of wonderful, isn't it? I like hearing about these things, too."

"Rumor? Wait, what? Iroha-chan." Jumping on that word, Haruno smiled sweetly at Isshiki.

"Uh, ummm…" Wondering what she was allowed to reply, Isshiki shifted her gaze between the indignant Yukinoshita and Hayama, who was chatting a ways away. She ended up saying nothing.

But Haruno didn't stop there, setting a light hand on Isshiki's shoulder. "Tell me?" That was all she said, and that made the question all the heavier. She had her usual smile on, just patiently waiting for Isshiki to say. After a few seconds of silence, Isshiki gave in, and with one eye watching how everyone else would react, she softly whispered into Haruno's ear.

Haruno listened gleefully as she made *mm-hmm* listening noises. *Damn, if she finds out, it'll be a disaster…*

But her response turned out quite different from what I'd imagined.

"Ohhh, is that it? …We went over this a long time ago, you know," she said frostily. After thanking Issihiki, she turned to leave as if her fun had been spoiled. "Let's go, Meguri."

"Okay!"

The two of them headed for the booth that had been indicated for her. Right before leaving, Haruno turned her head back and waved. "See you later, 'kay!" she called cheerily.

By contrast, Isshiki wore an awkward smile. Then her head slowly rotated toward me like a rusty machine, and she breathed a little sigh of relief. "Th-that was scary… That's *definitely* Yukinoshita's sister!"

"Nobody thought she wasn't."

"That's a rather unpleasant link to find between us." Yukinoshita put her hand to her temple and sighed.

Yuigahama gave her shoulder a pat. "It's okay! You're not really scary!"

"That just feels like another way of making fun of me…"

“Huh? N-not at all! You’re like, um, like, kinda…cute!” Yuigahama said emphatically, making a fist.

Taken aback, Yukinoshita quietly looked away.

Uh-huh. You guys are close, huh…?

Anyway, the career consultation was beginning. Fortunately, the only thing we had to help with was setup. It looked like we could leave the rest to the student council.

“All right, Isshiki, we’re gonna go,” I said.

“Right, thank you very much.” Isshiki bowed politely at us.

I nodded back at her, then called out to Yukinoshita and Yuigahama. “Then let’s get back to the clubroom.”

“Yes.”

“Yeah, okay.”

When I was about to leave the meeting room with the two girls, we passed by Hayama and a cluster of his friends near the entrance. I glanced over to see him chatting pleasantly with Miura and the rest.

“Ah man, who should I talk to?” Tobe said.

“There’s still time before your turn, so take your time thinking.” Hayama smiled wryly, then slid his gaze to the front. Ahead of him was Haruno.

“Hey…are you close with her, Hayato?” Miura murmured, without looking at Hayama.

Looking somewhat surprised, Hayama turned to Miura but then immediately broke into a broad smile. “…She’s just a childhood friend.”

As their conversation continued behind us, we headed back to the clubroom.

X X X

A little desktop calendar sat on the clubroom table. Well, it wasn’t so much a calendar—most of the paper’s surface area was plastered in cat photos, so if anything, it was a desktop cat photo collection. Whatever it was, I was having a staring contest with it and groaning.

“…The tea is done.”

“Mm, yeah. Thanks.”

While I was glaring at the calendar and slurping tea from my

Japanese-style teacup, Yuigahama came over to peer at the calendar. “Not much time left until the submission deadline, huh?”

“Yeah. But I have no idea…”

So far, I had indirectly asked a bunch of people about it, but nothing had come up that could help me figure out what Hayama had picked. Maybe it was because I’d been asking the questions badly, but still, I didn’t want to ask too directly and have it get back to Hayama. I’d asked him already and got a no. That meant he didn’t want me to know, and things could get uncomfortable if he found out I’d been prying anyway. I wanted to avoid creating any trouble for Miura.

As I was counting the remaining days and gathering my thoughts about various matters, there came the *click* of a teacup meeting a saucer.

I turned around to see Yukinoshita’s expression was more serious than usual. “Hikigaya… I’ve mentioned Hayama’s parents before, haven’t I?”

“Yeah. You said they were a doctor and a lawyer, right?”

“…Huh? Are they?!” This was news to Yuigahama.

“You never heard that?” I said.

Yuigahama pouted, kind of sulky. “It doesn’t exactly come up in normal conversation… I mean, I don’t know what your parents do, Hikki.”

“My parents are just normal corporate slaves, both of them.”

“Ah, same here. Although my mom is just a normal housewife…”

Ahhh, no surprises there… Thinking about how badly she fails at cooking and the weird ways in which she can be housewifey, that kinda made sense.

The environment you’re raised in will affect your personality at least somewhat. I mean, my aversion to corporate slavery is due to my upbringing watching my parents go through it. Oh well, their double income has meant our family has never suffered financial hardship, so I am thankful for that, though. And I’d even say my parents’ influence has made me positive toward the independence of women. In the future, I’m sure Komachi will also get a job, which’ll make ours a triple-income family. It’ll be very stable and secure.

As I was dreaming of my wonderful family plan, Yuigahama was moving on with the discussion. “Soooo then is Hayato gonna

inherit the family business?" she asked.

Yukinoshita put her hand to her chin and tilted her head. "I'm not sure… His father runs his own law office, and his mother's father runs his own practice, so I think there is the possibility…"

"Then that doesn't seem like it'll narrow his choice down to arts or sciences," I said. Of course, both lawyer and doctor require licensing. If his only choice were one of those two, that would naturally narrow down his options, but if both were possibilities, then no dice.

"Nghhh." Yuigahama moaned, then jerked her head up. "Wait, so then wouldn't either one be really amazing?"

"Indeed. I think they'd generally be seen as a wealthy family." Yukinoshita nodded.

It's true—both doctors and lawyers have a strong reputation for making lots of money. I'd known this fact about Hayama's family intellectually, but hearing it again now, it was pretty wild. *Why does a guy like that attend our school? Go to some better private school.*

Well, I guess it's similar enough for Yukinoshita. With that thought, I looked over at her. "Wait, would your family say that?"

"If we're speaking in *cash*"—Yukinoshita used the English word—"I suppose they have more. In overall assets, I wouldn't know, though." She said it so carelessly, like it was nothing. A young lady of tender age shouldn't be saying things like *cash* or *assets*.

Meanwhile, Yuigahama was staring up into thin air, tilting her head as she muttered out the English, "Cash…card?"

Ohhh, you know cash card*? Good, Yuigahama! Later, I'll tell you all about debit cards, too.*

Anyway, leaving Yuigahama aside, it was time to think about Hayama's course stream.

First of all, I was sure I was right to assume that he was going to university, and that was big. Hayama had fantastic grades, scoring second place in our year on proficiency tests. If he hadn't wanted to go to university, the teachers would've freaked out, and based off what I'd heard from Miss Hiratsuka, that wasn't happening.

Good so far.

But what I wanted to know wasn't Hayama's future itself. This was ultimately just about his choice of arts or sciences, about Hayato Hayama during his third year of high school.

"…I have no idea," I muttered.

After a bit of thinking herself, Yuigahama opened her mouth. “Maybe it’s arts. I feel like everyone is.”

“Yeah. Well, I could definitely see that.” The profile of Hayato Hayama that most people would picture was generally something like that. He didn’t start up conflict, he was friendly with everyone, and he was even capable of being nice to people like me and Zaimokuza down at the bottom of the social ladder. Imagining his star-studded *yeek-yeek tee-hee* life in the arts courses invited no discrepancies with my preexisting impression of him.

But there was something a little off about that. It was still unclear how I should take this.

When I resumed my pondering, Yukinoshita gave me a look like she had something to say. When I gave her an answering glance, she began to speak as if she were still working through the matter herself.

“I think…he’s picked…sciences…”

“Why?” Yuigahama asked.

Yukinoshita looked down uncertainly. “I don’t have a solid foundation for this assumption, and, um, this would also involve myself…” There was still hesitation and misgivings in her tone, so I stopped her without a thought.

“…You don’t have to force yourself to talk about it.”

But Yukinoshita opened her mouth, then closed it, opened and then closed it, until eventually, she raised her head with some resolve. “No, um… There’s no harm in knowing, is there?”

She sure is bad at talking about this. Not like I’m in the position to criticize. Yuigahama and I both straightened slightly in our seats and turned to Yukinoshita.

She slowly began to talk. “You know Hayama and my family have a long-standing relationship, right? He, my sister, and I were often together when we were small. My sister being who she is, Hayama and I typically followed her lead… So it might be fair to say he’s grown up under her influence.” When Yukinoshita was done talking, she breathed a little sigh.

This wasn’t much different from what she’d said at some point, back during the Christmas season. But now that I’d seen the three of them together with my own eyes and heard with my own ears their conversations of old memories, it actually felt real.

Hayama had shared time with those sisters.

I’d heard about who Hayato Hayama is now. And I’d heard

about who Hayato Hayama used to be. What I had to consider now was who he would be in the future. Anything else, I would leave aside for the moment.

"Um, so Haruno took sciences?" said Yuigahama. "Then maybe he'd go with science, too. Stuff from when you're little can be pretty powerful."

"Yes…but I can't say that for certain," Yukinoshita replied evasively. Yuigahama and I both gave her looks, prompting her to continue. "Though this may seem contradictory…," she began, "I believe that if he intends for our families to continue relations into the future, it would be more efficient for him to inherit the law office."

"So wouldn't that make it arts?" I said.

Yukinoshita gave a tiny shake of her head. "There are other ways our relationship could be maintained…"

Well, that was true.

You'd be able to maintain that relationship through other fields, not only as a lawyer. You might not even have to do it as a business thing. For example, like marriage—it doesn't sound like something that happens in real life, but it's definitely a possibility.

As I was considering this, Yukinoshita supplemented, "Of course, I don't know what his family is thinking. I can't say that won't influence his future. I've never heard anything to suggest he would turn his back on his parents' wills."

"Ohhh yeah. Hayato generally does family errands and stuff, huh?" Yuigahama expressed her plain impression of things, and Yukinoshita nodded.

Now having heard about this, I had a general understanding of Hayama's family situation. But it still wasn't enough to resolve things.

I found myself unconsciously scratching my head, and a sigh slipped from me. "Of course we can't go asking Hayama's parents. That's between him and his family; it's out of our league."

"True enough… But I think my mother hopes for our relations to continue, at least." Yukinoshita's expression was somber. I looked away slightly.

"All right. For now…I'll think about it a bit," I said, ending the conversation.

I wanted time to gather my thoughts. At this point, the only avenue left was to make conjectures based off what few pieces I

had. Now, I would just think about Hayama's future course.

Most of all… I had to do it, or I'd imagine something that my heart didn't want to imagine.

I expelled a long sigh to imply that the conversation was done for now, and Yukinoshita and Yuigahama both relaxed in their chairs a bit. We all reached for our teas at about the same time, and a peaceful silence was born. My now lukewarm tea felt nice going down my dry throat.

The sound of a teacup clinking as it was set down rang out in the quiet room, and Yukinoshita slowly opened her mouth. "Um…"

"Hmm?"

"I apologize for the other day, when my mother drove you off… I should have spoken a little better." Once the words were out of her mouth, she pressed her lips together in a line, gazing at the wobbling surface of the liquid in her teacup.

Yuigahama gently stroked her shoulder. "It doesn't bother me at all. Besides, we can't be butting in on a family gathering. Right, Hikki?"

"Yeah. It's really not something to worry about."

"…Thank you." With a peaceful smile that contained just the faintest hint of sorrow, Yukinoshita inclined her head slightly to me and Yuigahama. Everything about that gesture was beautiful: her straight back; her hands lightly folded on her knees; her thin, graceful fingers; and the long eyelashes hanging from her closed eyelids.

I was staring at it all when Yukinoshita lifted her face, and our eyes met. We both immediately turned away.

"L-let's call it a day. I'll put away the tea things." Yukinoshita must have felt a bit awkward, as she hopped to her feet and began to clear the dishes away. She set the teapot and cups on the tray, and she looked ready to go straight to a sink outside the clubroom to clean them.

"I-I'll help wash them!" Yuigahama started getting to her feet, but Yukinoshita stopped her.

"I'm fine. Wait for me." Then she briskly left the room with tray in hand.

When she was gone, Yuigahama and I exchanged a look. Then Yuigahama smiled and giggled. "Yukinon's slowly started opening up to us, huh? Before, she never talked about her family and stuff, right?"

“Well…maybe you’re right.” I think this was probably her own way of meeting us halfway. Even if it was really awkward and sudden and a little off in the wrong direction. She could handle most things deftly, but she was a total klutz with things like this.

Not that I could point any fingers.

I guess I should sit down and ask her, too, one day. Right now, I don’t really know where I should begin, but one day, I will.

X X X

Parting ways with Yukinoshita and Yuigahama at the school entrance, I headed for the parking lot.

The sun was fully under the horizon, and a winter wind blew between the school buildings. The other clubs had already finished up, and the courtyard area was utterly quiet.

Walking through the courtyard, I heard a voice calling “Heeeey.” But when I turned around, there was no one.

“Up, up!”

As told, I looked up. Above me was the student council room and Haruno Yukinoshita waving her arm out an open window.

“Hold on,” Haruno said cheerfully, and then she popped out of sight.

“What is she doing…?”

She really has nothing better to do, huh? I was thinking, when someone else came to stand by the window. When I took a good look, I saw it was Iroha Isshiki. She bobbed her head in a bow, and with a smile, she waved *bye-bye* at me, then yanked the curtains closed. *What’s with her…?*

What was up with that? I was wondering, gazing up at the student council room window, when I caught the sound of jaunty footsteps getting closer. I looked over right when Haruno came running up to me.

“Ahhh, I got so deep into conversation with Shizuka-chan and Iroha-chan—didn’t realize it got so late!” Haruno must have hurried over quite quickly, as she was a little out of breath. Then she glanced all around the area. “Where’s Yukino-chan? She’s not with you?”

“She takes the train.”

“…Awww. I waited for nothing.”

Huhhh? Didn't you get deep into conversation? Pulling an ambush, eh? Sheesh, she's scary… Most likely, after the career path consult, Haruno had been keeping warm in the student council room as she stared out into the courtyard the whole time. I'm sure she was making Isshiki help her kill time, too. *It's not my problem, and yet I've suddenly started feeling sorry for Isshiki…*

Haruno seemed to pull herself together, coming up next to me to clap a light hand on my shoulder. "Then you'll do. Walk me to the station."

"Huh?"

Haruno seemed unhappy with my reply, putting her hand to her waist with a pouty look. "Whaaat? You're going to make a girl go back all alone at this hour? A gentleman is supposed to escort a lady."

Uh, it's your fault for staying here this late, commonsensically thinking… The remark came up to my throat, but I swallowed it. Or to be more accurate, my breath was taken away.

Haruno took my arm, bringing her mouth close to my ear as if to tell me a secret, and whispered, "It's not often that you get to walk back with such a pretty older girl."

I shivered as a chill that was not from the winter cold ran up my spine. When I panicked and took a step away from her, Haruno giggled in delight. *…She's really teasing me here.* Unlike Isshiki or Komachi, her devilishness was Demon Lord levels. And as you know, you can't escape the Demon Lord.

Fanning my heated cheeks with one hand, I pointed toward the parking lot. "Well, fine, I guess… Can I go get my bicycle?" I answered, and Haruno lined up beside me and started walking.

"Yeah. Then let's go together."

There was an actual issue here, being that it was already dark, and there were places that had low visibility between here and the station, like the park and narrow back alleys and stuff.

Also, I am a man who has lived through Japanese society, a world of age-based seniority and female superiority. I'm weak to older women. While I'm at it, I'm also weak to younger women, with my sister first on the list. I also can't be firm with guys, either. I mean, I'm the weakest of all humanity.

We left the parking lot and went out the back gate. I pushed my bike, wheels rattling along as Haruno and I walked through the nighttime town.

It wasn't far to the station. The houses by the park still had lights up from Christmas, weakly illuminating the dark night path.

Considering she'd been the one to tell me to walk her back, Haruno didn't say anything on the way. Of course, I didn't start any conversation, either, and all that could be heard were the passing cars, the voices leaking out from houses, the winter wind blowing past, and our footsteps.

Eventually, when we approached a bending path, Haruno spoke to me for the first time. "So what course stream are you going with?"

"Well, arts, I guess."

"Ohhh, you're always reading, huh? As expected of the literary enthusiast."

"Ah, well, uh…I guess." Before, when I'd run into Haruno in town, I *had* been reading a book. But I'd just been reading because it had been awkward… That was just the Book Barrier technique. Since my reason was a little pathetic, I naturally looked away from her.

But Haruno pulled ahead by half a step, bending forward a little to examine my face. "What kind do you read?"

"…Basically anything. Except foreign stuff."

"Hmm. So then Akutagawa, Dazai?"

"I read *some* literary stuff… I just read more normal, general fiction."

Frankly speaking, I can enjoy literature when it's already up my alley, but when it's not—sometimes the only opinion I can come up with is something stupid and pretentious: *This really was the ultimate literary work! No wonder it's so famous! I thought it was an enduring masterpiece, so five stars!* In that respect, you can bash entertainment fiction like light novels as much as you want, so you can still enjoy yourself even if the content lacks any appeal. And so light novels are the best! The hell, that's the worst way to enjoy something…

As I was thinking such thoughts, Haruno nodded and made listening noises as she walked beside me. "Then you might not be suited for arts. I think you'd have more fun with social sciences, that sort of thing."

That made my mouth hang open. Suddenly, she had started giving me advice. Since I hadn't been looking for it, I wasn't all that happy about it—but I figured I should be grateful for her kindness. "…Thanks."

“You’re welcome.” Haruno smiled, then cleared her throat. “So then have you asked Yukino-chan which faculty she’s going for?”

Ngh, so this is what she really wanted to talk about! Thanking her was pointless… “Oh, I haven’t asked her which she’s picking.”

“…Well, I guess she won’t bring it up herself. Be sure to ask her, okay, Hikigaya?” She smacked me on the back.

Uhhh, it’s not that easy… But I couldn’t tell her to ask herself. I doubted Yukinoshita would so obediently answer Haruno, and most of all, I hadn’t actually asked her myself. I can’t tell someone else to do what I haven’t done.

“Make sure to ask before the next time we see each other,” Haruno said solemnly, and then she went “Ah,” as if she’d just remembered something. “That reminds me, have you asked Hayato directly?”

“Yeah. He kind of told me off and wouldn’t say.”

“Hmm, he wouldn’t say, huh…?” Haruno said, her eyes moving away from me and toward the station’s main street coming into view ahead. But she didn’t seem to be watching the flow of people coming and going. Her narrowed, well-shaped eyes probably were not on the present. “I see. Hayato had his hopes up, too,” she muttered suddenly.

This didn’t seem directed at me, but I asked back on reflex anyway, “About what?”

Haruno finally looked toward me and offered an enchanting smile. “About what you’ll find, maybe.”

And with that, Haruno sped up her pace a bit to come out ahead of me. Then she spun around, the hem of her white coat fluttering. “This is far enough; we’re at the station now. Thanks for walking me here.”

“Yeah—okay, then…”

I was about to offer her a casual bow when Haruno thrust her index finger in front of my face and continued in a bouncy voice, “Make sure to ask what Yukino-chan is picking. I’ll be checking your answers next time.”

“I don’t think that’s what checking your answers means…,” I said.

Haruno poked my cheek and smiled. “Don’t sweat the small stuff. See you!”

With a little wave, Haruno gallantly walked off. Rubbing my cheek where she’d poked it, I watched her go. She didn’t look back,

and she was eventually swallowed by the waves of people.

But even among the crowds, Haruno Yukinoshita stood out.

The Second Notebook

…Or it could be unique to everyone.

As I read along, I suddenly realized something.

If I was being honest with myself, there was something that had brought me back.

This book really did feel close to me. I'd even thought that it came very close to who I really was—and the word you'd probably use for that disposition is *bad-natured*.

But this was different.

I didn't give up, and I didn't lose interest, picking up a different book to continue my search. I read both *No Longer Human* and "Run, Melos!" over and over.

But they were definitely different.

Neither a literary master nor these famous books had come close to me.

When someone has spoken to you, shown they have empathy for you, and then turned out to be something completely different—it's pure despair.

Those similarities, resemblances, are why the differences bother you so much. It throws them into relief. You can't wave off those differences because you're so very similar.

I couldn't forgive myself for getting my hopes up, for thinking I understood, for thinking I'd *been* understood.

I'm sure I'm smaller, lesser, and more cowardly than the person depicted in *No Longer Human*. I'm troubled by problems so petty even Dazai wouldn't notice them.

So then, aren't I no longer human—or something even less? Aren't I even more suspicious and alone than the wicked and ruthless king?

Furthermore, I was disgusted with myself for using authoritative literature for the selfish purpose of gaining the answers to my incredibly personal problems. How shallow, foolish,

and ugly. I had not picked up these books for reasons of purification or education.

I just wanted to be denounced by the truth. I wanted something to see through this clown of self-aggrandizement.

And I wanted it to come from the outside.

So I'd gotten my hopes up.

Maybe this book, I'd thought. Or maybe this person, who was far more sensitive to wickedness than others; maybe she would find me. Maybe she would see through me.

But even though she could see so close, even though she could see through everything else, I was the one thing she wouldn't look at.

It was worse than a lecture or contempt. It was more painful than anything.

7

Hayato Hayama always meets expectations.

Closing the book, I collapsed into the sofa.

When springs creaked faintly through the quiet living room, Kamakura perked up his ears from his comfortable spot on the *kotatsu* blanket. Komachi was at cram school, and our parents were coming home late as usual. Only me and the family cat were here in the chilly living room.

Lying on my back, the lights were overbright, so I turned my face toward the window. It was already dark outside, and the winter wind occasionally hit the glass.

It had been a few days since the career path consultation, but I still hadn't been able to learn anything about Hayato Hayama's choice. Even after asking multiple people about it, I'd gotten nothing. I'd allowed time to pass in vain, and now suddenly, the school marathon was looming the next day. The career path questionnaire was due the day after that. The deadline was the end of the month.

I pushed myself up off the sofa and squirmed my way into the *kotatsu*. Lying on the table was my completed career path questionnaire.

I'd already decided on my future.

I hadn't even had to think about it to pick arts. For my target school, I'd written down private humanities and a decent university and faculty that were appropriate for my academic ability.

And as for on what basis I had decided my path, it was quite simply because I was good at arts subjects… I'm not good at science subjects, so I'd dropped that from square one. Fortunately—or maybe not—my own traits were clearly expressed in my grades, so I could decide on a course of action without worrying about it.

I didn't have many options to begin with, so I was able to

decide through process of elimination.

On the other hand, what about someone who has too many options?

For example, Yukino Yukinoshita.

How had she decided?

Though it was rather late to be asking that, I think I should have. Speaking purely in terms of her capabilities, she was the one closest to Hayato Hayama.

But I'd immediately written off the possibility that her choice might be of relevance. Not that there was any point in having that realization now. And if I thought about the reason why I'd done that, I'd be forced to confront an even thornier issue.

Right now, I should be thinking about Hayama's choice between science and arts.

Just how had he made the decision? If I were to bring up every option Hayama had at his disposal, there would be too many to count. And there were no negative factors in his life that would allow me to knock things off via process of elimination, as I had with myself.

The more I talked to various people about it, the less of a lead I had.

Not only was he good in both types of subjects, the possibility of a sports recommendation had even been implied. When you're that good, then AO entrance or designated school recommendations would also be on the table.

If I could know what his faculty of choice was, like Totsuka, then maybe I'd be able to calculate backward from that, but I was nowhere near a point where I could ask that. Or if Hayama believed himself to have such clearly terrible interpersonal skills as Zaimokuza, that would be something else, but that wouldn't be an issue for Hayama.

It was close to impossible to narrow it down based on his performance at school, be it in his grades or behavior.

Meaning I should look at it from another angle.

For example, some family situation, like Kawasaki. She was making her decision based on how it would affect her family. On the other hand, with Hayama, his family increased his options and wouldn't hold him back.

I couldn't identify any concerns or weaknesses in Hayama. I shared Tobe's opinion here. To borrow Ebina's words, he was

someone who would not slip up, would not hurt anyone, and would meet everyone's expectations.

No matter who I asked, no matter whose mouth I got it from, all I could see around him were possibilities.

Is that just the essence of Hayato Hayama—the ability to do anything?

Everyone saw him the same way: a perfect superhuman who was kind, cool, outgoing, charming, smiling, smart, and athletic. A good guy.

Everyone?

Was that really true?

There was one person who definitely didn't think so.

There was definitely one person who had said so to me in so many words.

…I'm not as good a person as you think I am.

If I was to believe those words, then Hayato Hayama was the one person who held doubts about the way he was. If anyone didn't see him as a good person, it was him.

It makes me sick how everyone sings his praises. But it's even worse that someone who meets those expectations exists. You know it's sheer hypocrisy, vicious falsehood, arrogant self-satisfaction, and you do everything you have to anyway. It's honestly so disgusting.

Someone once told me to stop sacrificing myself. Bullcrap. Doing it to meet other people's expectations, to avoid hurting others —*that's* self-sacrifice.

She'd said that he's always been like that. That he's the same as before.

If you have someone who's never turned his back on what others want, with his parents first on the list—someone who's always managed everything smoothly—what would he choose? Someone who's carrying the weight of others' expectations and trust and still lives up to it all—what sort of future would he aim for?

Agh, completely unbelievable.

If it were me, I'd crack. I'd want to throw away all the whole sham, to shatter it and ruin it. It's such a hassle, working to satisfy people I couldn't even know. I don't want even a hair of validation from the nameless, faceless masses I don't care for or know as friends or otherwise. I would reject all of it—expectations, admiration, all of it.

But I'm sure Hayato Hayama would not do that. He would stay as Hayato Hayama and keep from hurting any of them until the bitter, bitter end.

So many people took it for granted that they would get that clown act of goodwill and kindness from Hayato Hayama and force him to make that sacrifice. They swarmed around him, always seeking that kindness. They were arrogant. Unfortunately, Hayato Hayama was capable enough that he could give them what they wanted.

But there was one point that Hayama had stubbornly never yielded.

And that was the secret of his course stream choice.

Even though that would be meeting everyone's expectations, too.

Why had Hayato Hayama refused to share it?

As I was lying there, I saw a bright room dimly reflected in the glass of the window. I couldn't see beyond the transparent surface, and my eyes only lighted upon its blurry mirror image.

It was dark out, so my face reflected in the glass was dim. I looked unwell. I raised myself up, bringing my face close to the glass.

Sitting there, I remembered something that had happened before. Hayama had asked me what I would do if there were conflicting requests made of me. And to stop harassing him.

That time, both of us had ultimately avoided the issue and gave each other only vague answers. One of us putting off thinking about it for the moment, while the other offered a joke and a mild smile.

I think it's the same. Though the process is different, the conclusion of not choosing is the one thing that's the same.

So it was clear what Hayama's answer would be.

I picked up the cell phone, which I'd tossed onto the *kotatsu* and left there. From the few contacts I had saved in it, I found the person I was looking for, stood up, and pressed the call button.

The call sound went on for a while.

Until they picked up on the other end, I wondered many times if I should hang up. I didn't know if it was okay for me to make a request like this. What if I got on his nerves? What if he reacted with contempt?

But I hadn't been able to come up with anything resembling an answer, so this really was the only option for me to pick.

Eventually, I heard a reserved voice through the phone speaker. "…Hello?"

"Hey, it's me. Sorry for calling this late," I said.

The person on the other end, Saika Totsuka, replied in a bouncy voice, "Oh, no, it's totally fine. It's unusual for you to call, so I was a little startled."

Well, yeah. This was probably the first time I'd actually called. But what I was about to tell him now would probably surprise him more.

Sighing quietly, making sure Totsuka wouldn't hear it, I bowed my head, though of course he wouldn't see.

"…I want to ask you for something."

× × ×

The day after I called Totsuka was a bit windy, but the skies were cold and clear.

Boys and girls from first and second year were all streaming into the park, which was the starting point for the school marathon. From there, the boys' course would go over the sidewalk along the ocean, then turn around at the big bridge and come back.

It was a long way to run, a hell of a long way, in fact. Widdle Hachi's bad at math, so any number higher than three is soooo big!

But personally speaking, no matter how many kilometers it was, it didn't change what I would do. When the order came, we began lazily lining up behind the white line that had been drawn at the starting point. Just like a hagfish, I slithered along, mingling with the group at the head. Surprisingly, everyone readily opened up the space for me. I wonder why—is it because I'm invisibeel after all?

It was just a school marathon. This was no big fancy event, and it wouldn't affect our grades, either. I doubted many people would feel super-motivated when we were just getting forced to run out under the cold sky.

Except for one anyway.

Everyone expected Hayama to win, and he couldn't disappoint them. He wouldn't be allowed to blatantly slack off.

He was at the very front of the starting line, to my side, with a few people sandwiched in between us. It was sort of like pole position, so to speak. While he was stood there, bending and

stretching, the girls were cheering and watching for the moment he set off. The girls were starting thirty minutes after the boys. Until then, they would be our adoring spectators.

Hayama answered the cheers with a casual wave. The girls squealed, but he was looking at someone a little ways away from them—Miura. She must have felt awkward with all the other girls around, as she was only glancing over at him now and then. Ebina and Yuigahama were beside her, and Yukinoshita was another step away.

Then Isshiki came ambling over, too. When she noticed Miura was there, she bowed. Miura gave her a little nod back. Isshiki looked between Miura and Hayama and chuckled boldly.

Then she cupped her hands around her mouth and called out loud, "Go, Hayamaaaa! …Oh, and you, too."

Hayama waved back with a slightly strained smile, while Tobe, a little ways away, also replied with a cheerful and somewhat inexplicable "Yeah!"

"No, no, I don't mean you, Tobe," Isshiki said, waving a little hand to say *no, no*.

Miura watched in silence, but then she sucked in a big breath and blasted it all out in a yell. "H-Hayato… G-good luck!" Her call was quiet enough that the other cheers just about drowned it out.

But still, without a word, Hayama raised a hand with the same calm smile on his face.

Miura watched him, entranced, and then without making a sound, she slowly nodded.

Beside her, Isshiki watched the two of them with satisfaction, then turned back to me. "…Good luck to you, too!"

Guess she was talking to me this time.

O-okay… Why is she so stubborn about not saying my name…? Does she not remember it…? I was wondering when Yuigahama, who was zoning out watching, took just one step forward.

She waved her hands wide. "G-good luck!"

She must have been conscious of the people around her, as her call was fairly reserved compared with Isshiki's, but it did reach my ears. *…Phew, she didn't call my name. She's so thoughtful.*

I vaguely raised a hand as thanks, and Yuigahama squeezed her hands into fists in response. Then my eyes locked with Yukinoshita's, where she stood beside Yuigahama.

Yukinoshita gave a wordless nod. I thought maybe her lips

moved just slightly, but I couldn't hear her voice.

I don't know what she said. I don't know who she was speaking to, either.

But, well, it was still motivating.

Right then, guess I'll do this…

I slid farther forward to stand at the very front of the starting line, like Hayama. He didn't look at me, just staring straight ahead. I rotated my shoulders, stretched my Achilles tendons, then took one more step forward.

When I was all ready to go, I suddenly felt a tap on my shoulder. Turning around, I saw Totsuka in his gym uniform. His thin legs were in constant motion as he shivered from the chill. But then he stood still and smiled at me. "Let's do our best, Hachiman."

"Yeah… I'm counting on you, Totsuka." The starting line was so packed that my bow accidentally hit someone. But I did it anyway. I was pretty sure my request of him the other day wasn't something good to ask for. I felt bad for making it.

But Totsuka raised his hands in loose fists in front of his chest and gave me a big nod with a burst of enthusiasm. "Yeah, leave it to me! I doubt anyone will appreciate it, but…," Totsuka said, a little embarrassed as he checked up on the other kids. He looked over to the guys who were waiting behind him—the members of the tennis club.

"You can be subtle about it. As long as they're aware, that's enough. You don't have to force yourselves," I said, giving Totsuka's shoulder a pat. Then I wondered if my hand was sweaty and yanked it away anxiously. *Ah, damn, thinking about it* did *made me sweat, and now it's even slimier…*

That was close—almost remembered that time during the school field trip in elementary school when a teacher had forced me to hold hands with a girl, and my sweaty hands had caused her to hate me, and the whole class had called me Ickygaya… Damn it, I just remembered it.

Well, you weren't gonna sweat that much during the winter. Even now, the cold wind blowing from the ocean was stinging my cheeks.

Then suddenly, the wind stopped.

"Oh-ho, Hachiman. There you are… Fngh, and Sir Totsuka is with you?"

"Oh, Zaimokuza," Totsuka replied.

Carving his way through the crowds to pop out of nowhere was Zaimokuza. It seemed he'd made use of his large frame to act as a wind breaker for me. "Hachiman, let's run together!"

"I don't wanna… Oh, but there was something I wanted you to do for me, though."

"Homm?" Zaimokuza tilted his head.

I didn't want anyone else hearing, so I leaned slightly toward him. …*It's weirdly warm around him. Yuck.*

When I whispered into his ear, Zaimokuza expelled a *fshururu*. "Hmunn… I do fathom what you would have me do. But I have no desire to do aught that's tiring or attention getting…"

"…Yeah, of course." My request for Zaimokuza was a lot to ask. Considering his athletic level and mental fragility, it wasn't something he'd take on for me so easily. I mean, I think if someone asked me, I'd just say no.

I'd asked him because he was someone I could use like an old rag without even the slightest compunction, but even Zaimokuza was a person. Even if my heart wouldn't hurt, his would.

"Ah, sorry. Don't worry about it. Forget it," I said.

But Zaimokuza squared his shoulders, folded his arms, and threw his head back in this cocky pose. "You may treat me to a bowl of extra-fatty ramen at Naritake."

"You're okay with that?" I asked.

Zaimokuza heaved a dramatic sigh as if he were throwing up his hands at me. "Good grief, Hachiman, I have no choice… To know what is righteous and fail to do it is cowardice, as they say."

Why's he got to say it in the most obnoxious way possible…? I couldn't really say this when I'd just asked him a favor, but he really is obnoxious.

When I gave him a dull look, he quietly added so that no one would hear, "But I shall not do so openly! I shall not have people gossiping about me and posting vicious slander about me online! If I meet with blame, I'll cough up your name immediately!" he declared, thrusting a finger in my face.

Seeing that, I couldn't help but crack a wry smile. *Good ol' Zaimokuza! He really is trash! The coolest trash!*

"Ah, that's totally fine. Thanks. While I'm at it, I'll add on some butter topping for you."

"Heh, that will be the perfect caloric compensation."

Uh, you can run the numbers all day, but you can't burn Naritake-

level calories from a marathon, though…

Thanking Totsuka and Zaimokuza once again, I looked over at Hayama, who was standing on the white line. He was chatting pleasantly with Tobe and the other nearby guys when he noticed my gaze and smiled softly at me in a silent question.

Shaking my head at him in reply, I fixed my eyes ahead. It was already about to start. Even without looking at the clock installed in the park, I knew that.

The voices of the boys crowding behind me gradually quieted. The sporadic cheers of passing girls also retreated.

Once everyone was silent, as if she had been waiting for that moment, someone came walking toward the white line drawn on the ground.

"Right. Are you ready?" said Miss Hiratsuka, pointing a pistol to the sky.

Why is she doing this…? This is normally a job for a gym teacher. Geez, she just wants to be the star of the show again, huh? Or does she just want to try firing the gun?

Miss Hiratsuka held the gun up high, while with her other hand, she covered her ear. When her finger covered the trigger, the boys faced forward, and the girls held their breaths and watched.

She paused a few seconds like that, then slowly began, "On your marks… Get set…"

An instant later, she pulled the trigger, and the sound of the gunshot rang out.

Then we all burst into motion.

I started running slowly at first, to get my legs warmed up. My goal for the time being was to keep up with Hayama. But most of the guys beside me were putting out top speed, as if it was the climax right from the beginning.

The reason for that was probably the flashes constantly going off then. I don't know if it was for the graduation album or what, but there was a cameraman at the school marathon. And since the beginning was going to be in the photo, we had a jillion idiots taking the first few dozen meters at an all-out sprint. You know it's just because they want to brag later. *I was at first place up until the middle!* Boys are so stupid.

Most of these guys were putting their lives into the starting line sprint, so they'd wear themselves out quickly. The real competition would be ahead, when we left the park area and came out onto the

sidewalk.

Casually avoiding the starting line sprinters who were steadily dropping out, I called out to Zaimokuza, “Zaimokuza, you’re up.”

“Heh-heh, ngnu? …A-aye!” He was already looking slightly out of breath, but when I called out to him, he sped up. I say that, but Zaimokuza is Zaimokuza. It wasn’t that fast.

Hayama was ahead of me, and when we jumped out into the lead, Zaimokuza somehow clung to the spot behind us, wheezing *fshururu* all the while. We kept this up as we came to the end of the park area, where Hayama turned around the rock there to step out onto the sidewalk. I followed after him.

But even if Zaimokuza was running seriously, a few dozen meters was his limit. He gradually started falling back, and at the narrowest part of the way, the transition from the park to the sidewalk, his speed rapidly decreased. “Agh…no more…,” he cried, and his speed dropped to about a sluggish walk. Suddenly, the people behind him slowed down, and his large frame lumbering in front of them was clearly getting in their way.

Thanks to Zaimokuza, I’d managed to put some distance between us and the rest for now.

The problem was what came next.

No matter how large Zaimokuza was, he couldn’t completely block the way. Eventually, some would slip by him, pass him, and try to join the leading group.

While I was repeatedly turning back to check how things were going on behind us, Totsuka’s group of tennis club members came over. My eyes met with Totsuka’s over my shoulder. Then we nodded at each other.

The marathon’s course used regular sidewalks. Three people running abreast would completely block the way. So I had made a request of Totsuka—that while I was at the front, he and the tennis club would run bunched together. Of course, any blatant barriers would become a problem, so I was okay that they left enough space so that anyone who wanted could weave between them or slip by them to overtake them.

There was no need to completely block the road. The psychological effect was enough to make people hesitate to overtake them.

If you had some people who weren’t taking this marathon seriously, and there was a second-place group of people running at

around the same speed right in front of them, then what would that first group do?

They probably wouldn't overtake the second-place group. If there's no need to get first place, if they could be satisfied with a decent place in the ranking, then they'd just join the second-place group. If things went well for them, they might try to take advantage of an opportunity.

And it worked like a dream. Once we came out onto the sidewalk, nobody followed close after the top group of me and Hayama. Maybe some people might come after us for the last stretch, but I didn't care about that.

If I could create a situation where Hayama and I were running together right now, that would be enough.

I glared at Hayama's back, running up ahead.

The stage was set for me. My plan was working so far.

From here on out, what began would by my game, and my game alone.

X X X

The wind blowing from the ocean froze my cheeks. When the heat overflowing from within me met the cold air, my skin tingled.

Every *smack* of my shoes on the asphalt sent an impact running to my core.

Was that roaring sound the wind or the sound of my own body creaking? I couldn't quite tell. The sounds gradually blended together, turning to heat expelled from my mouth.

I heaved out a ragged breath and inhaled the sharp smell of the ocean salt.

Were the trees growing on the way by the ocean to prevent soil erosion? There had been a lot of pines at the starting line, but we were beyond that now. The barren trees around us stood out like white bones.

I moved my legs without pondering the trivial details in my head. It was like my heart focused on circulating my blood. My heartbeat and pace competed to see which was faster.

As I ran, thoughts sporadically rose in my mind and faded away, bubbling up only to vanish again.

It was a good thing I commuted to school by bicycle. If not for

that, I would hardly have been able to run at all. I wasn't in a sports club, after all. It's not like I dislike endurance running itself. In fact, it's the type of sport I'm better at, compared with things like ball sports. I think that's because it's something you can do entirely by yourself. You don't cause trouble for anyone else, and there's a clear goal established. All you have to do is zone out and let your mind chew on pointless thoughts while you mechanically move your legs.

But the marathon that day was a little different.

It was far more painful than usual.

I was going faster than when we did it in class. The chill was especially severe, and the wind made it even worse, too. And with so many thoughts in my head the night before, I was a little short on sleep.

There were all sorts of reasons.

But the biggest reason was that Hayato Hayama was right there in front of me.

Of course, he was accustomed to this from his club workouts, so he showed no signs of exhaustion as he continued to run smoothly. His upper body moved efficiently, and his lower body was stable—his form was polished. I could believe he'd won last year.

As for me, on the other hand, I could feel the increased blood flow to my head, and it was the most I could do to keep up with Hayama. I wasn't even trying to pace myself.

But that would end soon.

Thus far, there had been no changes in the progress of the race. Hayama and I were still in the lead, while second place was taken up by a group clustered around Totsuka and the tennis club. They were doing a good job gathering people together into the second-place cluster and controlling the speed of those behind them. Or maybe, all the runners planned to make their dash at us in the latter half of the race. I'm sure there were more even farther behind them, but unfortunately, they were too far back to see from a glance over my shoulder.

Hayama continued to maintain a steady pace. Our initial sabotage seemed to have worked, as there was a pretty big distance between us and the rest. It didn't seem the others would catch up so easily.

The problem was me.

We were only about halfway through the length of the race, but I was giving out. I'd had a stitch in my side for a while now, the

soles of my feet stung, and my ears were numb. Frankly, it was bad enough I wanted to go home right now. If this had been right after lunch, I absolutely would have puked. I'd managed to run this far by making use of every trick in the book, but I had to make my move soon, or I wouldn't be able to follow him anymore.

Running and staring at Hayama's back the whole time, I suddenly felt something different below. A cold wind was coming up the legs of my shorts. Right then, we were approaching the bridge that was the turnaround point. Teachers would be lying in wait on the bridge to hand us ribbons to show we'd made it.

I just about sighed in relief that finally half of this was over, but I forced that down my throat and diverted the oxygen to my lungs instead.

I couldn't lose focus yet.

I sped up a bit to catch up those few steps to Hayama ahead of me. My feet hit the ground even harder.

I really did have to speed up, or I wouldn't be able to catch him. Alas, there was a clear difference between the power of his legs and mine. Running normally, I could never run alone alongside him.

This was why I had gotten help from Totsuka and Zaimokuza, then completely ignored pacing myself. I'd invested everything I had to get this far.

All of that had been for now, for this moment.

Heaving out breath after ragged breath, I somehow caught up to Hayama.

When I came up beside him, Hayama, who hadn't turned around even once, looked at me for the first time. His eyes widened, and he seemed a little surprised. "I'm impressed you're keeping up with me…," he said without panting.

By contrast, I gasped out, "Well…you know. If I don't…worry about pacing…it's not impossible."

Hayama tilted his head with a glance at me. By his expression, it seemed he wanted to say, *Why would you do that?*

I couldn't help but laugh. My throat was parched, so it just made me choke. I waited for the coughing to subside, then slowly opened my mouth. "Nobody's expecting me to hit the finish line anyway. I don't care if I pull out halfway."

In fact, never mind ranking, I wasn't even thinking about completing the race. If I could just avoid getting in anyone's way

and run by Hayato Hayama around the switchback, then I didn't care. I'd devoted everything to making it this far… But despite my efforts, it was the most I could do to stick behind Hayama when he had to be pacing himself normally. That fact was inducing some grade-A despair. It just about broke my spirit, but we were already past the switchback point at least.

How do people feel when they meet the switchback point of painful asceticism?

Do they despair that there's still half left to go, or are they relieved to have already come halfway? With most people, it'll be one of those. And either of those feelings will create a weakness in their hearts. They'll become aware of just how tired they are. Source: me. Frankly, if I could've taken a break, like, *Finally, half over!* then the exhaustion would've hit me all at once. If I looked down and thought, *There's still half*, then my legs would start feeling heavier.

That weakness, that tiredness, was my opportunity. When people are pressed, they'll let their real feelings slip. Just like with my sister Komachi, Hayama will want to cough up what lurked at the bottom of his heart.

That was why I'd recklessly pushed myself this far.

I'm sure in a normal situation, he could turn aside whatever questions I had with his usual mild smile. So I had to get him with his guard down when he couldn't avoid me.

But although Hayama was surprised by me coming up beside him, he once again drew his usual aura of calm around him. His expression was a little severe—he was still running, after all—but it didn't seem to me like he was rattled. I'd still need another little push to shake his balance.

I had to shoot right through him with one remark. Right to his core.

I forced my panting to calm. My chest hurt, but I sucked it up and twisted the corners of my mouth to smile. "…Was Miura convenient for keeping girls away?" I said.

Hayama turned to me and fixed me with a sharp glare. Instead of swallowing his hostility, he let it spill out as a hot breath.

Ahhh, that's it. That's the kind of look I wanted to see.

After that wordless glance, he decided to commit to ignoring me, as he sped up a bit.

I dogged him desperately, calling after him again. "So? Was she

useful?"

To be honest, I know Miura isn't a bad person. Now that I'd gotten a glimpse at how incredibly honest her innermost feelings are, it hurt me a bit to say something like this.

He had to feel the same, hearing me say it.

"Shut up a minute," Hayama said without looking at me, his voice oozing frustration. The force behind it was nothing like his usual calm, and it just about made me retreat.

But I made a conscious effort to take my feet forward. "I'm not gonna shut up just 'cause you said so… I'm not as good a person as you think I am." Borrowing the words that a certain someone had said at some point, I showed him a mean smile.

Hayama looked at me like I was an idiot, then snorted. "You're joking. I've never thought you were good."

The remark was so cold, my running slowed just a bit. If I wasn't careful, I would fall behind, so I faced sharply forward.

"You jerk…," I grumbled without thinking.

A small, somewhat scornful smile rose on Hayama's face. "I don't want to hear that from you."

Indeed. I almost laughed. But it was worth it, to get a different reaction from usual out of Hayama. This was the best possible timing.

Running, I evened my breath again so I could talk without gasping for air. I got right to the point. "Which course stream did you pick?"

"I'm not telling you."

"I'll guess. Sciences."

Hayama breathed a short, exasperated sigh. "…There's only two options. I'm obviously not going to answer."

"Then I'll put it another way," I began, speeding up my pace just a bit. I made a conscious effort to lift my heavy thighs, coming out just a few steps ahead of Hayama. Then I turned my head to look back. "Make it sciences. I don't care which you picked. I'm not really interested. But if you can still change it, then change it."

"Huh?" Hayama made a very stupid-looking expression, rare for him, and for an instant, he pitched forward. He immediately compensated for it, coming up to run next to me again. "…That's an interesting thing to say." Maybe he was a little flustered; he was even panting a bit.

"You're not giving me a choice. I had to know which you'd

pick, but…you won't tell me, and I couldn't even begin to guess… So my only option is to make you change it to the answer I want."

Hayato Hayama had too many options, and he couldn't narrow them down. I should just shave some of those options down. By force even. If I could make the course stream choice for him, then I'd be able to complete our request from Miura.

"You've got this so ridiculously backward…" A humorless laugh slipped from his lips. Maybe he was shocked.

But of course, I had my reasons for saying this. "This is in your best interest. It's the only answer that checks the boxes you need."

"What boxes?" Hayama got a dubious look. Thanks to that, his pace let up a bit. I matched him.

"You told me to stop giving you trouble, right? Meaning you want to stop being the person everyone wants you to be."

Hayama's feet stopped right there. When I noticed that, I came to a halt, too.

I suddenly felt all the sweat that was pouring out of me. I probably hadn't noticed it until now because of the wind blasting me from the front. With a swipe from my jersey sleeve, I turned to Hayama.

He was looking at me, stunned, and he sighed deeply. I doubt it was from the running. "What makes you think that?" He glanced over at me, as if prompting me, then started walking. I followed after him.

"No reason. I just thought that if it were me, I'd drop something. The standard tactic for making the choice is just to drop subjects you're not good at and things you don't want to do."

If you're speaking purely about entrance exams, your classes at school won't influence much at Hayama's academic level. Prep school would cover any bases that needed it. So the meaning behind his choice would not be based on entrance exams—either for preparation or to focus on a particular university he wanted to go to. So what had Hayato Hayama been dropping when he made that choice?

The remaining meaning was his life at school in third year and his social relationships.

"Frankly, the choice between arts and sciences isn't much of a problem if you can just manage your entrance exams somehow. But you didn't tell anyone what you picked. And by not saying, you meant to drop something, didn't you?"

Hayama didn't answer. He just continued to walk in silence. But I could tell his silence was prompting me to continue.

"There are fewer people in sciences, and there also aren't many girls. You could put some distance between yourself and all the crap you have to deal with it. Plus, if you're just choosing a different academic path, then everyone'll accept you being away from them. If it all comes to a natural end, then nobody will be hurt, and you can avoid betraying anyone's expectations."

My throat was dry, so my voice cracked in several places, but I managed to put the words together and finish my speech. "This is the only way to fulfill the conditions that suit you."

The dripping sweat must have bothered him, as he wiped it off by swiping back his hair and then looked toward the ocean. Then he quietly muttered, "I really wouldn't have been able to be friends with you…"

"Huh?"

Right as I was about to question him, I heard quiet running steps from behind us. I turned around to see a bunch of people from the number two group getting close. It seemed they'd seen Hayama start walking and were taking this opportunity to go for it.

Hayama and I just watched them pass us by.

As we watched their backs grow distant, Hayama opened his mouth to say, "Oh…you're really something."

"What, so was I right? Is it sciences?"

"No. You really are twisted," he said, shaking his head. If he was expressly declaring one answer was wrong when there were only two options, that meant the remaining one was correct.

But when I was about to say *So then arts*, Hayama's soft and collected voice cut me off.

"I hate you."

"O-okay…"

He said it so suddenly, without looking at me at all, I couldn't say anything. I know I'm not exactly popular, but even I've never been told that so directly and breezily.

Hayama seemed completely unbothered by my reaction, still facing forward as he looked far into the distance and spoke dispassionately. "I feel like you're far behind me, and I hate that so much. I want to be on even terms. So I want to raise you up; maybe it's all that is. In order to affirm your loss."

"…Oh." I'm sure I felt the same way. I'd raised him up to a

special status, forcing a lie on him in order to convince myself—that there was no doubting that Hayato Hayama was an absolutely good guy.

He must have actually heard my meaningless response this time, as he turned to face me. Then he smiled at me—it was charming but challenging. “So I won’t do what you tell me to.”

“I see.” I nodded, and Hayama did the same in response.

I think Hayato Hayama sincerely did not care about the course stream choice, and whichever he did pick, it wouldn’t be much difference to him.

So it was enough to hear this much now. This would resolve Miura’s request. It wasn’t like the problem had gone away, but what came after this was beyond my range.

“Let’s get going,” Hayama said, and then he started lightly jogging along.

You jerk, I can’t run at all anymore, I thought, but I somehow followed at Hayama’s heels.

There was one more thing I wanted to ask.

I forced up my dragging legs. Fortunately, thanks to that little break, I’d caught my breath a little. My heart was still kind of racing, but I took deep breaths to calm it. “…Are you choosing arts for family reasons? I mean, like for a family relationship sort of thing.”

“My family? Have I ever spoken to you about that?” This speed must have felt like a casual jog to Hayama, as his steps and voice were light now.

“Uh, well, I overheard…” As my body was chilled with sweat, an even colder sea breeze blew over me. The freezing coldness, the sticky discomfort, and the weird silence made me agitated.

Meanwhile, one more runner passed us by.

But Hayama must have lost interest in ranking now, as he looked at me with interest before losing himself in thought. And then he suddenly said, “Are you worried about that rumor?”

“Huh? No, it’s not that… Just, well, I mean, you know… Like.” I was at a loss as to how to explain.

Hayama laughed out loud. Despite running with such flawless form before, his upper body was shaking and rocking all over the place.

“…What’s so funny?” I asked.

He wiped his eyes almost deliberately. “No, sorry. If it’s about

that, then don't worry. I'll make sure it's resolved."

"Ahhh, it'll help a lot. I can't stand the tension in the clubroom."

As we talked, I started hearing the panting of another student approaching us. I turned back once, then faced forward again. I figured there'd be quite a gap opening up between us and those who had passed us.

My feet were as heavy as if they had fishing weights tangled around them and wouldn't quite move like I wanted them to. "They've gotten pretty far ahead… Guess I'll take this slow. Sorry I kept you from scoring another victory," I said, meaning that as a proposal.

But Hayama shook his head. He swung his arms at his sides as if lightly stretching them and grinned. "…No, I'll win. That's who I am."

He was saying that winning, meeting everyone's expectations, committing to playing Hayato Hayama to the very end was who he was.

He gradually upped the pace, and when he came out a few steps in front of my trudging run, he turned back. "And besides, I don't want to lose to you."

And with that parting remark, Hayato Hayama ran off.

He left me behind far, far in the distance.

I didn't even have enough energy left to follow after him. It was all I could do just to watch him go. After coming up with the answer I couldn't and dreaming of possibilities I couldn't bring myself to believe in, Hayato Hayama grew distant.

Damn it, he's actually cool.

Maybe he's pretty competitive, too, I thought stupidly, just as my right foot collided into my left calf. My feet got tangled up, and I failed to catch myself and tumbled right there on the pavement. I rolled straight over onto my back and looked up above.

My white breath melted into the clear, bright, and blue winter sky.

X X X

In the end, whether I fell down or lay down had no effect on the marathon schedule, and it solemnly proceeded.

I fell, and then after lying on my back like that for a while, Totsuka helped me get up, but I really couldn't cause any more trouble for him, so I had him go on without me, while I dragged my aching legs to somehow reach the goal alone.

Though I wasn't in last place, during the final spurt, I was with the group at the tail end, putting in some desperate effort only before the finish line. The instant I crossed the finish line, I went, "I can be done now, right…?" as I checked all around. By the way, the only one to reply was Zaimokuza, who was running together with me at the end.

By the time I finished running, my knees were shaking like tambourines at karaoke. It was almost funny. Ha. Fun-knee.

When I flopped down to check how I was doing, I found I was a mess. I'd scraped open my knees and shins, my shorts were completely muddied, my butt was cramping, my side was stabbing me the whole time—maybe I should try to find what didn't hurt. I'm already a pretty painful sight to begin with, so this was educational, letting people know that yes, I can be even more painful to look at (and that's a painful joke).

If I hadn't been encouraging myself along the way, like, *You can do it. ♡ You can do it ♡*, I think my life points would have wound up at zero.

Of course, nobody would be waiting for me at the goal.

Just the apologetic crowd of one—the gym teacher—while everyone else had left for the park square. I went to peek over there while they were in the middle of the award event.

Generally, something as trivial as a school marathon would not have an award ceremony, but seeing how Isshiki was the one acting as presenter at the event, this must have been a last-minute plan by the student council. She was a surprisingly capable person. Iroha Isshiki was fearsome indeed.

"Well then, now that the results have been announced, let's have a comment from the winner!" Holding a mike she'd probably procured from the student council room, Isshiki seemed very pleased as she cheerily assailed our eardrums. Seeing the vice president adjust the speakers every time she did was a little surreal.

Looking around, I saw most everyone was gathered in the park square, with no division between first- or second-years, boys or girls. The faces from our class were all in proper attendance: Miura, Ebina, Tobe, and Totsuka.

As I was gazing at this from a distance, Isshiki called out the victor. “Theeen let’s have our winner, Hayato Hayama, come to the podium!”

At the call, Hayama, wreathed with a bay laurel crown, immediately came up to the podium. The gallery bubbled into cheers.

Wait, he seriously won…?

“Congratulations, Hayato! I just knewww you’d win!” Isshiki greeted him with blatant favoritism.

Hayama replied with a peaceful smile. “Thank you.”

“Right then, go ahead.”

When she handed the mike over to Hayama, applause, whistles, and a call of “HA-YA-TO” rose up. Tobe’s interjections (“Yeeeah! Whoo-hoo!!”) were especially obnoxious.

Hayama waved his hand with a bashful smile in reply, then began speaking. “Things got a little sketchy in the middle, but thanks to a good rival and all your support, I made it to the end. Thank you very much,” he said all in one go, then paused a second. He found Miura among the audience and waved. “And Yumiko and Iroha especially…thank you.”

When he said that, the cheers went up a notch. Ooka whistled with his fingers, while Yamato clapped wildly. And as for the two in question, when Hayato called their names, they both froze in surprise but then gradually started twisting around shyly, blushing and looking down. Yuigahama kindly patted Miura’s shoulder.

Seeing Hayama’s warm gaze and the two girls’ reactions, the onlookers murmured a bit. *I get it. So this is what he meant by “resolving things.”*

The victor continued with his comment. “Moving forward, I’ll just be focusing on club activities and working hard coming up to our last tournament… Also, a lot of the soccer team gave a disappointing performance in this race today. Our practices are going to push you hard.” Hayama directed an unpleasant grin over at Tobe and the guys.

Tobe let out a *hyeeegh* and fell backward. “Hayatooo, don’t do this! Warn me first, man!” He was just as loud as anyone on a mike, and everyone burst out in wild cackling.

What a kind world…

“Okaaay, thank you very much! And that was the victor, Hayato Hayama. Right, applause… We don’t really need anything

from second or below, right?" Isshiki checked with the vice president while the applause was loud enough to drown it out, but the mike caught all of it. *What the heck is she doing…?*

As Isshiki was trying to somehow smooth over her gaffe, Hayama chatted with Miura and company down on the ground. They didn't seem at all distant now, like they had been before. In fact, Miura seemed embarrassed by the eyes on her, quietly hiding behind Yuigahama and Ebina.

I watched the scene, then left the park square.

I had seen with my own eyes Hayato Hayama being Hayato Hayama. Maybe he was nothing more than a self-obsessed clown who had perfected the art of meeting expectations, but when he managed it so perfectly, I couldn't make a single complaint.

Right as I left the square, I collided with the flow of people also leaving the park. Watching out of the corner of my eye as they exchanged remarks like "So the rumors were just rumors after all, huh?" and "There's no way he's going out with Yukinoshita, huh?" I dragged my wobbly legs to the school health room.

X X X

The inside of the school building was deserted, and it felt far colder than the square where I'd just been. Most of the other kids had to still be at the marathon venue or passing the time how they wanted.

I changed into my indoor shoes and walked the empty halls of the special-use building. But even that made my injured legs throb.

I knocked on the door of the health room.

"Come in," a familiar voice replied.

This voice…, I thought, opening the door to find my prediction was not mistaken. Beyond the door was Yukinoshita.

She was still in her gym clothes, sitting on a chair, looking at me with a puzzled expression. "Hikigaya? …I'd thought for sure it was Yuigahama."

"She's still at the park. What are you doing here?"

"I was taking a little break when they made me withdraw…," she said with a frustrated *ngh*. Apparently, it was a very smooth withdrawal. And seeing her frustration, she'd basically had the intention of finishing the race, huh…?

"You…were hurt?" She looked at my leg, then winced a little.

“Yeah, a little.” I couldn’t say that I’d fallen over my own feet. It was too lame. And besides, if I said something like that, I’d sound like an abuse victim making excuses. Like, *No! I really did just fall!* I couldn’t make her worry unnecessarily that I’m suffering domestic violence.

“You could have just gotten treated at the park. The school nurse should be over there.”

“When I crossed the finish line, they weren’t there…,” I answered.

Yukinoshita put her hand to her chin, considering. “Ah, you had bad timing. Or is it that you have bad luck? Or bad eyes. Or…”

“Or personality or temper—yes, everything about me is bad. Anyway, I can just use this antiseptic, right?” I asked as I rummaged through one of the medicine cabinets, the one that wasn’t locked.

Yukinoshita sighed. “…Looks like you have the bad habit of taking without asking, too.” She stood, shooing me away from my spot in front of the cabinet to pull out antiseptic and bandages, then pointed to the chair in front of us. “Sit down there.”

“Uh, I can do it myself.”

“Just sit.”

Though I wasn’t entirely happy about this, I sat down anyway, and Yukinoshita moved the chair she’d been sitting on in front of me.

She laid one hand against my leg as she began to disinfect the wound. The smell of the disinfectant was sharp in my nose. When her head bent over near me, I got a waft of soap.

Every time she prodded the wound with the cotton swab with disinfectant on it, it sent an itchy pain running through my leg. I doubt she was really used to giving this sort of treatment. She was so timid about touching it; occasionally, the disinfectant got into the wound and stung.

“Hey, um, th-that stings…”

“Of course it does. It’s disinfecting, so of course it would affect you.”

“Yeah, could you not treat me like a germ?”

“It’s proof that it’s effective. Suck it up.”

Is that, like, the logic of good medicine tasting bitter? I can’t quite trust that. If being bitter makes it good, then wouldn’t that make my life the greatest, though?

Despite what she said, she did seem to be more careful, letting up on the pressure touching the wound, and she used her hands more gently. Now it was ticklish, and I had to force myself to not jump.

Both of us stayed silent until she was done disinfecting the wide area of the scrape. I gradually got used to the prickling pain, too, and the tension in my body relaxed.

Yukinoshita wound a bandage around once, twice, then slowly opened her mouth. “I heard you were running with Hayato… Were you able to get something from him?”

“Yeah… I know it’s not sciences, at least,” I replied vaguely, not sure how to be accurate about it.

Yukinoshita gave a little giggle. “What a funny way to put it… It’s done.” She breathed a satisfied *phew*, then raised her face. When she did, her face got close enough to mine that we were just about touching.

“…”

Both of us froze up in that position.

Her skin was a faded white, like a dusting of snow in winter, her black eyes sparkling and wet. Her long eyelashes were wavering ephemerally, the bridge of her nose well-formed and straight, and a sigh slipped from her smiling lips.

Her shoulders twitched, sending her long, glossy hair flowing down.

Flustered, I looked up at the ceiling, falling backward to get away. One of my wounds stung. “…Ah, thanks for this,” I thanked her to cover my embarrassment.

Yukinoshita sat back down in her chair, jerking her face away. “…Oh, no, it’s nothing at all.”

After that, the health room went completely silent.

For lack of anything better to do, I took a look at the bandage she’d just wrapped for me. And the tie of the bandage was in a dainty ribbon. *…Is this what she meant when she said it’s done? There are those weird metal things for holding bandages, aren’t there? Use those. What’s with this ribbon? …Damn, it’s cute.* As I was looking at the ribbon tie, I couldn’t help smiling. I felt a little better.

I sat on the edge of my seat to stretch my back. That pose must have looked strange to Yukinoshita, as she tilted her head.

Now, I figured I’d try asking her. “…Hey, can I ask you which course stream you’re picking?” I asked.

Yukinoshita made a slightly confused little sigh. Her hand stopped on its way to her chin, pausing in front of her chest to ponder. “I’m in the International Curriculum, so the course stream selection has nothing to do with me…”

“…Oh, of course. I just figured I’d ask. Forget about it.” I’d basically anticipated that answer, but I was satisfied, regardless. Satisfied with myself anyway.

I’d expected she would casually turn the question aside, but she took her now idle hands and laid them gently on her lap, head slowly lowering as she looked at me. “It’s the first you’ve asked that sort of thing.”

“Is it?” I said, playing dumb.

There had been any number of opportunities for me to ask things like that, very personal things, and each time, I’d drawn a line and made sure to never cross it. After all, I was sure that wouldn’t be allowed.

Yukinoshita cleared her throat as if this were hard to say, then, peering up from below, she looked into my eyes. “…It is basically arts.”

“Oh.”

“Yes. So…we’re all together for now,” she said, and she smiled. She reminded me of a little girl getting ready to go on an outing.

“Well, just in terms of category, huh?”

I was picking arts, and I was pretty sure Yuigahama was, too.

I don’t know how much point there is in that classification. In the end, we would eventually be setting forth into different places, different worlds. Just as the three friends who had once been young hadn’t been able to stay together forever. With the passage of time, the status quo is certain to change.

What doesn’t change is the facts of the past. That can become a burden to tie you down, but it might also become a stake to secure you. All this one step across needed to do was leave a footprint.

“Then I’m going back to the classroom,” Yukinoshita said. With that short farewell, her hand raised up just a little, waving as weakly as ever.

“Yeah. Then see you later.” I nodded back in response, then put my hand on the door of the health room.

Then the door rattled. *Is there a wind coming in from the cracks somewhere?* I threw open the door to find someone standing right in front of me.

“Whoa… You startled me…” I tried to calm the thudding of my heart at the sudden appearance, while Yui Yuigahama stood frozen and speechless.

“…Oh, Hikki.”

“Yuigahama… You just get here?” I asked.

“Huh? Ah, yeah. Yeah, yeah! I was just about to knock…” She looked flustered, a moment too late. Then she closed her eyes a moment, and after she’d caught her breath, she jerked her face up. “Yukinooon! Sorry I’m late!” she said loudly, entering the health room, going straight over to sit opposite Yukinoshita.

Yukinoshita’s expression was mildly questioning, but she immediately shook her head and smiled at Yuigahama. “I don’t mind. I wasn’t bored.”

“All right, then… Oh, I know. Hikki’s here, so this is perfect.” Yuigahama faced me and beckoned me over.

Well, I couldn’t leave the door wide-open. It was only one wall apart, but the hallway was really cold.

When I went back into the health room, I was enveloped by warm air. Yukinoshita and Yuigahama were sitting side by side in front of the source of that warm air: the heater.

“We have to report today about Yumiko’s thing, right? But Yumiko’s going straight to the after-party now. What should we do?”

Unlike Yuigahama, who seemed in a rush, Yukinoshita put her hand to her chin as she took her time pondering with a *hmm*. “…So our only option is to go talk to Miura about it on the way from school.”

“Yeah,” I agreed.

“You’re supposed to say you’re going to the after-party!” Yuigahama wailed, and Yukinoshita and I exchanged a look. Both of us were already used to this pattern. We nodded at each other and replied at almost the same time.

“Then I’ll go if I can.”

“Yes, I’ll decide depending on the circumstances.”

“That’s just another way of saying you’re *not* going!” Yuigahama breathed a tired sigh, then said with all sincerity, “Um, well, but I guess it’s better compared with before…” With that, she rattled the wheeled stool over to take up position next to Yukinoshita. “Then let’s go together!” Then, more quietly, she repeated, “…All of us, together.” She quietly leaned close to

Yukinoshita.

"…You're smothering me." Perhaps because they were in front of the heater, Yukinoshita scowled. But she didn't pull Yuigahama away, and Yuigahama seemed like she wasn't going to move from her spot. In front of the heater, her expression changed to something more happy and cozy.

The school nurse will be coming back soon enough to chase us out anyway…

Well, I guess it's okay for us to stay in this warm room until then.

8

That's how **their** pasts and futures cross, leading to the present.

When the sun had fully set, the temperature took a dive, and the wind picked up, too. As I walked along the way by the park, going from school to the station, the barren trees swayed in the north wind.

I tugged the collar of my coat close and completely wrapped the lower half of my face with my scarf. Walking ahead of me were Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, and Miura. There was no club time that day after school, so we were walking the way to the after-party together to report to Miura on her request.

With her tartan check scarf and her beloved curls flapping in the wind, Miura muttered, "Oh…so Hayato's going for arts."

"Yeah. Like, probably, though." Yuigahama smooshed her bun uncertainly. Well, it was secondhand information, and the person who had told her was, as a source, unreliable. So of course she was going to be unsure.

But even hearing such a vague answer, Miura hopped in her squished-heel loafers and gazed up at the sky in a show of indifference. "Then maybe I'm fine with that, too."

"Should you be deciding that so casually?" Yukinoshita's tone was gentle, but there was a somewhat critical edge to it.

Miura didn't look at her, though, still lifting her face to the darkness of night like a stargazer. "There isn't really anything I wanna do. And if I need sciences, I can just study hard at cram school, right?"

That's something you could manage if you had academic ability on a level with Hayama, but I dunno about Miura. It seemed I wasn't the only one thinking maybe that was a little too optimistic —Yukinoshita's expression was doubtful, too. Yuigahama was

nodding. *You're the most dubious one here, academically…*

But my worries were misplaced.

"I could take an extra year for entrance exams…but you can't do that with *this*," Miura said and stopped, then came up on her toes and folded her hands behind her like she was stretching her back. From behind, I couldn't see her expression. But I could imagine her eyes were as clear as the winter sky.

"You'll have a rough time, dealing with *that*," I said.

"Hey, Hikki!" Yuigahama gave me a chiding jab with her elbow.

Miura turned just her head to glare at me, too. "Huh? I don't need to hear that from you, Hikio."

"O-okay…" *Wahhh… Miura-tan is scary…*

She glared at me for a while but then dropped it and started walking again. As a counterargument, she offered the tiniest mutter. "It's, like, you know…even with any hassles…"

Then she spun back around to face us. The hem of her coat and her shining golden hair danced in the air.

Then she bent over and said a little bashfully, "I think it'll be fine," and grinned.

When she said something like that with such a pretty smile, I had to be impressed. I hadn't known you could make it that simple. It was rash and plain and simple, and that was what made that desire so pure.

I stared at her smile, stunned, until Miura noticed and put it away again. She began striding off with a grumpy look.

"Oh… That's enough, huh? It didn't have to be so complicated…," Yuigahama muttered. When I turned toward her, she was squeezing the chest of her coat. Yukinoshita, standing dazed beside her, was looking at Miura with an expression of surprise.

But maybe it wasn't something to be surprised about. Back during the school field trip, too, Miura could see Hayama's intentions and Ebina's will. So there was a good possibility that her fluffy feelings now would approach something real… Plus, Miura can be a little mom-like!

When she realized we were just standing there, Miura came back. "Thanks, Yui." Facing Yuigahama, she gave her a little pat on the shoulder. And then she glanced at me with a slight turn of her head. "Oh, and Hikio, too."

The apathy… I do indeed feel completely incidental. And my name isn't Hikio, either. Well, whatever.

"And…Yukinoshita? You too… Um, well, so…" Turning away from me, Miura looked straight over at Yukinoshita. After some fidgety hemming and hawing, she seemed to find her resolve, glaring straight at the other girl.

"Sorry." She flung down her head in a bow.

Yukinoshita blinked, puzzled, but then a little huff of a chuckle slipped out, and she swept the hair off her shoulders with one mittened hand. "I'm not really upset. In fact, I'm impressed with your courage. Not just anyone would come right up to me and get physical."

"Huh? Why are you so arrogant about it? You are infuriating… I shouldn't have apologized."

Though both their words were hostile, their voices were gentle.

Yuigahama had been watching the two of them eagerly the whole time, and she finally leaped on the pair like she couldn't hold back anymore. "Okay! Then let's all go to the after-party!"

"I…" Yukinoshita twisted around in Yuigahama's arms, attempting to refuse.

The other captive, Miura, glanced over to me to say, "…Why don't you come, too?"

Yukinoshita hesitated for just the slightest moment. Then a small smile came to her lips, and she answered, "…All right. Then just for a bit."

Miura jerked her face the other way.

The place we went to for the after-party was a rather fancy-schmancy venue with a fancy-schmancy storefront and an English-style pub. There, a bunch of kids around Hayama's clique and Isshiki were having a good time being loud and chattery.

Looking at this, it seemed more accurate to call this Hayama's victory celebration rather than an after-party. Hayama's clique was there, plus Isshiki and Totsuka and his friends, and for some reason, even Zaimokuza.

Going into the pub, Miura immediately headed over to where Hayama was, while Yuigahama seemed unsure what she should do. When Yukinoshita nodded at her, she gave a *What can you do?* smile and followed after Miura.

Meanwhile, Yukinoshita and I promptly ordered some drinks,

then went to lean at the end of the bar counter.

"Cheers to a job complete." Yukinoshita, standing beside me, lifted her glass.

I raised my own to the same height. "Hmm, yeah."

Neither of us were that comfortable with this loud atmosphere. I think us watching from the corner as everyone else had fun was the perfect distance away for everyone.

I watched the crowd wordlessly for a while, but then Hayama must have noticed me looking. While he was going around talking to various people, he came over to us. *The man of the hour going around to greet everyone. Tough job…*

"Hey…thanks for coming," Hayama said.

Yukinoshita shook her head in response, as if to say, *It's not a big deal*, and I nodded in agreement.

While I was wondering if I should say something to congratulate his win, Hayama suddenly bowed his head. "Sorry. I caused you a lot of trouble… Y'know, with the rumors."

Yukinoshita was speechless, confused. But only for an instant, and her attitude immediately turned firm as she said the same thing she'd said before in the clubroom. "That hardly counts as trouble. Compared with back then, it's nothing serious."

"*Back then*, huh?" Hayama muttered, a little bitter.

Yukinoshita's expression darkened slightly. "…I understand a little now. I think there would have been a better way to do it. So I think I caused you trouble, too… I'm sorry." This time, Yukinoshita was the one to offer a little bow. When she raised her head again, there was a look in her eyes like nostalgia for a long distant past. "But I'm grateful for your consideration," she added.

Hayama's expression was filled with surprise. He was staring at her like he was taken aback. "…You've changed a little."

"Have I? It's just that so many things are different from how they were before," Yukinoshita said, looking over at Yuigahama, and then she glanced at me. It was kinda like I was hearing a conversation I shouldn't be hearing, and I felt restless. I had to look away.

Yukinoshita breathed a sigh that sounded like a chuckle and turned back to Hayama. "I don't think you have to be bound by the past, either… There's no need to force yourself to chase after someone else."

"…That's also part of who I am," Hayama said and smiled.

Proudly somehow.

Yuigahama pattered over from behind him, and Totsuka came following behind her. A little worked up from the party atmosphere, Yuigahama wound herself around Yukinoshita's arm. "Yukinon, the food's here! There's, like, tons of chicken! A big whole roast one!"

"It's really amazing! You come, too, Hachiman!" Totsuka grinned at me.

It was feeling pretty uncomfortable here, so I was grateful for this invitation. I was about to give Totsuka a hearty "Yeah!" and follow after him when Hayama stopped me with a gentle hand.

"We'll be there soon, okay?" Hayama gave a mild smile to Totsuka and Yuigahama. Then he added, "Right, Hikigaya?"

Yuigahama nodded. "Then we'll be waiting over there!" She gave the other girl no choice in the matter as she marched Yukinoshita straight away. Totsuka gave me a little wave and headed back to his seat.

Awww… I wanted to peck at the chicken with Totsuka…

Watching the three of them go, Hayama toyed with the glass in his hand, and the ice in it clinked. "She has changed a little after all… She's not chasing Haruno's shadow anymore." Hayama's gaze was sharp as it followed Yukinoshita. His tone darkened. "…But it's nothing more than that."

"Isn't that enough, though?" I answered without even having to think. I'm sure to her, that was one form of growth. She'd always been compared with someone greater than herself. She'd chased and chased after that shadow, tried to acquire something different from Haruno, and this was proof. So then, I figured she should be proud of it.

But Hayama gave me a dumbfounded look, drank from his glass like its contents were bitter, then asked me gravely, "…You haven't noticed?"

"Noticed what?"

"Well, if you don't get it, then maybe that's for the best…"

"Now you're being annoying."

"Someone else has been talking to me like that for a long time, so I grew to be that way myself." Hayama smiled wryly. His manner of speaking was indeed similar to that of a certain someone we both knew.

Once Yuigahama and Totsuka were seated, Miura and Isshiki waved over at Hayama impatiently. That had to mean to hurry and

come. Hayama casually waved back at them and was about to return, but then he gave a small *ah* as if he'd remembered something, turned back to me again, and said, "Oh yeah, I forgot to say something."

"Yeah?"

"It's about your explanation. The reason I didn't tell anyone what course stream I'm choosing. It's not that I want to cut off my relationships. Going to a new grade or to university won't reset relationships."

"Except it totally will."

"Only for you. The two of us are different."

I shrugged, then replied a little mockingly. "…Oh, I see. Then why wouldn't you say?"

Hayama tossed back the contents of his glass and sighed. Then, with a slightly sorrowful expression like a mourner offering a speech at a grave, he said slowly, "If you make a choice when you have no other options, then you can't call that your choice, can you?"

Now that he said that, I could finally understand. It wasn't that Hayama wouldn't say what he'd picked…

He couldn't say it. Even the fact that he wouldn't say it was not of his own will.

Hayama had always met the expectations and hopes of others, and the result was that he could no longer do anything but act in accordance with them. For him, anything other than the optimal answer was not allowed. He'd told Tobe that if you don't make the choice yourself, you'll regret it—but in fact, the one with regrets was Hayama himself. It was like his penitence.

Hayama would keep meeting the expectations of others, too. From now on, it would be by his own will.

So I had to be the one person to reject that. I had to make sure he knew there was someone who wouldn't force expectations on him.

In my opinion, only a pertinent rejection is true understanding, and cold disinterest is kindness. An affirmation from people who don't understand will just be another shackle weighing him down.

"I also forgot to say something… I hate you, too," I said, turning my head away from him.

Hayama's eyes widened a moment, but then with a *pfft*, he burst into laughter. When his laughter settled, he sounded satisfied.

“I see. This may be the first time someone has ever said that to my face.” This time, he finally did take a step away from the bar counter. “But still…I won’t choose, not anything. I believe that’s the best way.” And then he added, “It’s to satisfy myself.” He smiled and returned to where he belonged.

But I couldn’t smile.

If you’re going to find fault with the answer Hayato Hayama had come up with, if you’re going to call it insincere, you would come up with a convincing answer yourself. You would make sure to come up with a proper answer that was different from his.

I took a big gulp of the ginger ale in my hand and looked over to where everyone was sitting.

A stinging harshness remained in the back of my throat.

The Third Notebook

…So then who was it unique to?

I don't know how many times I read it.

Before, I think I'd sympathized with the village shepherd.

"Justice, love, fidelity—they're really worthless when you think about it." It's all ridiculous.

Every time I think that, that line comes to me.

"Someone trusted him. Someone trusted him."

To me, that line seemed like the whispers of the devil. As you lend your ear to the sweet ring of those words, you turn yourself into a monster of trust. You chant in your heart that you will allow no betrayal.

It's the realization of your own vile nature that makes you desperately attempt to paint over it. When you cover it up, others see your facade as your true self, and that eventually becomes taken for granted. It becomes who you really are.

If you start suspecting that's all there is to it, then there's no end to it. You can never make the judgment yourself.

So I just kept waiting, thinking someone would have to see through that. And in the process, I eventually came to sympathize with the wicked and ruthless king instead.

The one who said he cannot trust people.

But the end of the story is as everyone knows.

However…

What really happened at the end?

The king said you cannot rely on the hearts of men. I bet the wicked and ruthless king still doesn't believe in the existence of that fidelity, even now. He might try it, but he can't quite bring himself to believe it, and even when it's presented to him so plainly, he won't trust it—isn't that why he just wants to get inside them to try again, to destroy them?

If you're struck on the cheek for doubting, then who is it who

most deserves to be struck?

I closed the book and turned my gaze out the window.

Already, the uncertain sun had descended beneath the horizon, and the final remnants of light were gone.

Fidelity. Or possibly, the truth.

How can you say for sure that's not an empty delusion?

Is there even such a thing as something real?

9

However, **Haruno Yukinoshita** spake thus.

Sticking a bookmark into the book I was reading, I tossed it down on the table and lifted my head. From the sidewalk café near Chiba Station, I had a good view of the people coming and going.

The month was coming to a close, the skies were cloudy, and the temperature was low, so then why would they bother making this café outdoors? I got my coat back on with a resentful glare. The person I was looking at was the one I was waiting for, walking toward me while waving. She quickly bought a coffee at the register, then came over to the seat in front of me.

"Sorry to make you wait!" said Haruno Yukinoshita, just as cheerfully as she had the night before when she'd suddenly called me on the phone.

I don't answer unknown numbers on principle, but if someone calls me over and over, don't be surprised if I break. *Maybe it's some kind of emergency*, I'd thought and reconsidered. And then when I had answered, she had told me only the time and place where we were meeting and then hung up, and now here we were. When I'd tried to call her back to refuse, she wouldn't pick up…

"…Uh, how did you know my phone number?" I asked her.

"I got it from Hayato," Haruno said all cutesy ☆ wootsy with not a shred of shyness.

Oh yeah, guess I did tell Hayama before, huh? Bastard… Just handing it over to the number one person he shouldn't…

But now that she knew, there was nothing to be done about it. Firmly swearing that from this point forth I would set her calls on *refuse*, I decided to ask her what her business was in calling me there that day. "Did you want something?"

Haruno seemed displeased by the way I cut straight to the point, puffing up her cheeks in a pout as she glared at me with

narrowed eyes. “You’re so cold! And when I finally got a date with you! Your attitude is *sooo* different from that time with Gahama-chan.”

“Da— Uh, that wasn’t what that was, and this isn’t that, either,” I replied, stuttering.

She chuckled smugly, unbothered, and pointed at herself. “You hate pretty older girls like me, Hikigaya?”

“You might be pretty, but if you’re saying that stuff yourself, it’s no wonder someone wouldn’t like you,” I answered.

Haruno nodded, *hmm-hmm*ed, then, with upturned eyes, offered me a stinging reply, “But you hate girls who won’t admit they think of themselves as pretty, even when they do.”

“…True.” *Suddenly, she’s convinced me…* I really didn’t think highly of girls like that.

Well, if I’m to be honest… If anything, I love both pretty girls and older girls!

However, when the subject was Haruno Yukinoshita, other feelings won over.

I’m scared of her. Of her perfect outer mask, and the intensity underneath that she doesn’t try to hide if you see through to it. And also of those eyes, which seem like they have something hiding in their depths. That’s why I slid my gaze away and asked once again, “So anyway, what is this about? Why’d you go to the trouble of calling me out?”

“Ah, yeah, yeah. I wanted to check your answers. Did you ask Yukino-chan about her course selection?”

“…I do know what it is, but it wouldn’t be fair for me to say.”

“Oh my, how dutiful of you. But she did actually tell you. Huh… She trusts you quite a lot, huh?” Haruno smiled brightly as if to say, *How nice*.

It was weirdly embarrassing to have her appraising me. And that reminded me of that conversation in the health room, too. I found myself fanning my face. “…Trust? That’s not what that’s about.”

“Oh, so you do understand.”

I was struck silent. Though I hadn’t meant that answer as anything serious at all, Haruno Yukinoshita replied without a smile, as if this was so tedious to her.

She took a gulp of her coffee, then traced the rim of her cup with her finger as she looked at me with dark eyes. “Yes, that’s not

at all trust… It's something more cruel." Her soft-looking lips smiled pleasantly but not her eyes. Her cold voice had a ring to it that made her sound like an entirely different person. "Nothing's changed. And she thinks that's fine, you know. Just one of her many cute traits, but…I really don't like it myself." Her pretty face twisted callously. Her eyes were looking at me, while in fact she wasn't actually seeing me at all.

I wanted to withdraw, even though my thoughts had still not yet come together. "If it's not trust, then…what is it?"

"Who knows? But at the very least…" Haruno offered a dramatic shrug, and for just a moment, her smile returned, and her eyes focused on me. "I wouldn't call it something real… That's what you said, wasn't it?"

It was true; I had said that. Even I couldn't grasp the meaning, the significance, of those words. They had no solid concept behind them—only faith.

Something real. Something to call truth or possibly honesty. Fidelity even. I still don't understand what it is, exactly.

"Is there such a thing as something real…?" Haruno muttered, looking up at the winter sky covered in a thick layer of clouds. Her question had just the slightest lonely ring to it, and I wondered where it was directed.

It made me think back. A certain person had called it a closed happiness. Another person had asked me if I hadn't noticed. And now before me, Haruno Yukinoshita doubted its existence in the first place. If there was such a thing as truth or honesty at all.

My hand felt like it might tremble as I reached out to the paperback I'd left on the table to touch it gently.

Having been blasted by the outside wind all this time, the book had gone cold, and it made me hesitate to read the rest, to know the conclusion.

Afterword

Good evening, this is Wataru Watari.

It's fully autumn now, huh?! Autumn of reading, autumn of sports, autumn of appetite, autumn of arts, autumn of labor, autumn of work, autumn of corporate slavery—there are many sorts of autumns, but what sort of autumn are you all having? Regardless of the season, I'm always working, so actually, I want it to hurry up and be New Year's break already!

But the long nights of fall will make it easier to read and to write. It's quiet and cool, and the nights go on… It seems to me like a season where your time alone can be used most effectively. In that sense, winter isn't much different, but times like these enable you to see all sorts of things.

Things like *Why am I working so hard that I'm making things difficult for myself?* or *The nights are long, but functionally, my number of work hours hasn't changed, so it's not like I get more sleep time…* Of course, it's not just negative things. My eyes will turn to fun things and cheery things, but it seems more often that when I look at the bleak darkness sprawling outside my window, I discover a dark and gloomy future there. But that negativity is why I can see light.

Perhaps times like that will make someone, or no one, leave a bit of a monologue.

Maybe the answer is finally to be found in the middle of a winter night with no dawn, on a path with a strong, cold headwind. Leaving aside if his answer and her question are right or wrong… When he encounters someone similar, is what he feels a sense of affinity, or is it a sense of separation, that they're hopelessly different? If he takes that step toward them and gains answers and questions, then what sort of choice will he make?

Anyway, this has been *My Youth Romantic Comedy Is Wrong, As I Expected*, Vol. 10.

And below, the acknowledgments.

Holy Ponkan⑧. *Uhyou!* The wicked big sister Haruno-chan is on

the cover! I look forward to seeing *Shirobako* every week, too! Amazing! Thank you very much.

To my editor, great Hoshino. Lots of time has passed as I've continued to say *C'mon, I can get the next one on time easy, ga-ha-ha!* I'm very sorry for doing that every single time. Thank you very much. *C'mon, I can get the next one on time easy, ga-ha-ha!*

To all the staff and related parties of the media franchise: I've made so many selfish requests recently and caused trouble for everyone. I have high hopes for the series as it gains new appeal. Thank you very much.

Also, in the writing of this book, I have referenced *No Longer Human* and "Run, Melos!" (by Osamu Dazai / published by Shinchou Bunko).

And to all my readers: Finally, this story is in its final act, and as usual, I continue to wander off course, but I am steadily nearing the goal. I would be glad if you would please support me to the end. Thank you very much.

Well then, I've run out of page space about here, so I'll lay down my pen now.

On a certain day in October, while drinking what you gotta have when it's cold out, *hooot* MAX Coffee,

Wataru Watari

Translation Notes

Chapter 1 … In the end, **Komachi Hikigaya** looks for divine help.

1 ***No Longer Human*** (more literally, the title is *Disqualified from Being Human*), written by Osamu Dazai in 1948, is considered one of the greatest works of modern Japanese literature. The semiautobiographical novel is largely about alienation and suicide, and the author later went on to commit suicide himself.

2 ***"It's just a corpse…"*** This is a standard dialogue line when investigating dead bodies in the Dragon Quest series.

3 **"Wait, a cat ghost *youkai*? I wish they'd make it clear if he's a cat or a spirit or a *youkai, meow*."** Hachiman is referring to the mascot character Jibanyan from *Yo-kai Watch*.

4 **"I mean, there is that saying about looking to the gods when you're in trouble."** The saying Hachiman is referring to means that people suddenly become faithful when there's disaster, even though they normally don't pray.

5 **"If it's pinch after pinch and another hopeless pinch. At times like that, you want something Ultra-ish, you know?"** This is a slightly garbled version of the *Ultraman Gaia* theme song, which features the lyrics "When it's pinch after pinch after pinch, you want Ultraman! / When things are just hopeless and helpless and hopeless, you want Ultraman!"

6 Dazaifu is in Fukuoka, quite a ways away from Chiba, and is famous for the Tenmangu Shrine there. It's another Tenjin Shrine, like the Kameido Tenjin Shrine Hachiman mentioned, dedicated to Sugawara no Michizane, a famous scholar, poet, and politician of the Heian period. He's a major god of academics.

7 "I figure about the only thing cheaper…when they're fish anyway?" This original Japanese gag here was "I figure about the only thing that cheap is the Portopia murderer. The murderer is Yasu. It's actually really boring." *The Portopia Serial Murder Case* is a 1983 PC adventure game, and Yasu is punning on *yasui*, which means "cheap." The game is a bit of a meme as a well-known spoiler; saying "Yasu is the murderer" is like saying "Darth Vader is Luke's father."

8 "I'm even praying that you can't take the *M* off *mother*." This is a reference to an old ad for home tutors that says, "Remove the *M* from *Mother* and she becomes an other." The point is to be careful about not using mistaken English.

9 "…erasing and writing and erasing and writing *KESHITEEEE! RIRAITO SHITEEE!* over and over." "Eraaaase it! Rewriiiiite it!" is part of the lyrics for "Rewrite" by Asian Kung-Fu Generation, which was also an OP for *Fullmetal Alchemist*.

10 Chiiba-kun is the Chiba prefecture mascot, a red dog modeled after the shape of the prefecture.

11 "Maybe that's what they call a *Yo-kai Botch*—I mean, my social life has been pretty thoroughly botched." In Japanese he says, *Yokai Bocchi*, *bocchi* meaning "loner." It's a pun on *Yo-kai Watch*.

12 "…and one failed is absolutely delicious, and if on top of that, it leads to them growing distant and breaking up, then you'll be eating like Gohan ga Susumu-kun." In Japanese, he

says, “Your rice is delicious” (meaning schadenfreude), followed up by *Gohan ga Susumu-kun. Gohan ga susumu* means to “have an appetite,” and it’s also a brand of packaged food products. Susumu is also a boy’s name, and there were a bunch of memorable TV ads in the early 2000s featuring the mascot Susumu-kun.

13 ***Miko Miko Nurse*** is the name of a 2003 eroge.

14 ***“Hachichika is going home!”*** “Erichika is going home!!” is a quote from a *Love Live* Blu-ray extra. It became something of a Twitter meme.

15 “Ohhh, it’s one of those knockoffs, huh? It does kinda look like a cheap Hatchimal…” The original pun here was on *pachimon* (knockoffs) and Hachiman.

16 ***Three for the Kill!*** *(Sanbiki ga Kiru!)* is a historical TV drama from the 1980s and 1990s about three wandering swordsmen.

17 “Thanks to Komachi’s antics, I was somewhat at a loss, but there’s no resisting the little sistering. Oh nooo, I’ve been little sistered.” In Japanese, he says, “I was feeling rather at a loss because of Komachi, so I’ve decided to name this phenomenon *Komaicchingu*. Oh nooo, I’m so *Komaicchingu*.” This is a reference to the 1980s comedy manga *Maicchingu Machiko-sensei,* whose trademark phrase is *Maicchingu!* A sort of Japanglish word that means “How embarrassing!”

18 “Chii is learning” became an Internet meme due to how often the robot girl says that line in the CLAMP manga and anime series *Chobits*. It’s something you say whenever you learn something new, especially new words.

Chapter 2 … As usual, **Haruno Yukinoshita** stirs things up.

1 “I’d definitely bawl like Nobita saying his final farewell to

Doraemon." In Japanese, Hachiman says *dora-naki* , a made-up word from the promotions for the *Doraemon* movie *Stand by Me*. There's a lot of crying in it.

2 Chibatman is a Chiba resident famous for dressing up in *Dark Knight* –style Batman cosplay and driving around Chiba in his three-wheeled vehicle.

3 "Yuki-no-sweetness…" The Japanese pun here was on *bukiccho* (awkward), making *Bukinoshita*.

4 "The clothing I'd chosen had been reviewed harshly: 'I'll stomp on it!'" No, that was Piiko, wasn't it? Or wait, was it Osugi? Well, whatever." Piiko is an older TV personality, born in 1945, and the one who said, "I'll stomp on it!" is his twin brother, Osugi, another TV personality.

5 "And instead of *hangaa*, you can just call clothes hangers *emongake*." The joke is that literally nobody does this. The Japanese language has had a very aggressive influx of English loanwords that increases every year. Hachiman jokes about this being higher consciousness, but it's becoming the new norm.

6 "*Per…sona…!* By the way, I prefer 3 over 4. I would absolutely prefer to summon my persona with a gun to my head!" Here, Hachiman ends his sentence with *de arimasu*, which is how Aigis from *Persona 3* speaks in Japanese. (In English, she tends to omit contractions.)

7 *"Why am I here?! Why am I here?! Dowa-ha-ha-ha! It's because of* youkai. *It's not my fault. It's because of* youkai.*"* These are the lyrics for a song from *Yo-kai Watch*, "Youkai Taisou Daiichi," which goes, "Why am I sleepy in the mornings? Why am I sleepy in the mornings? Dowa-ha-ha! It's because of *youkai*. Yeah, that's right."

8 "Run, Melos!" is a short story also by Osamu Dazai (the author of *No Longer Human* mentioned above), a classic that's often read

in Japanese schools. It was also the subject of an Internet post that became a meme and coined the term *zuttomo*, meaning basically "best friends," which Hachiman quotes here.

9 **"I decided to commit to being a behind-the-scenes support, like one of those stagehands dressed in all black. *No, I will be even darker than black…*"** The original Japanese gag here was "I decided to commit myself to covert support [*kuroko ni tessuru*, literally, commit to being a stagehand]. But anyway, the phrase *kuroko ni tessuru* had this unusual Kuroyanagi Tetsuko feel to it." Tetsuko Kuroyanagi is an old-school TV personality and actress (born 1933).

Chapter 3 … At some point, **Iroha Isshiki** started hanging around.

1 ***QED: Shoumei Shuuryou*** (localized as just *QED*) is a mystery manga, as is *Spiral: The Bonds of Reasoning*.

2 ***"Okay… I'll make it through today, too."*** *Kyou mo ichinichi ganbaru zoi*, which includes a cutesy, meaningless sentence ending in Japanese, is a quote from the protagonist of the manga *New Game!* that became memeified.

3 **"But time has begun to move again"** is a quote from *Jojo's Bizarre Adventure: Stardust Crusaders*.

4 **"Her adaptational ability is so high. Is she a member of Tokio? Bet she could survive on a desert island…"** Tokio is a band under Johnny & Associates, a prominent talent agency for many boy bands and male idols, that also had a long-running variety show called *Za Tetsuwan Dash!* (The strong arm dash), which involved the members and guests taking on various challenges.

5 **"*Iroha ga Kill!* Cut down in one neat stroke… The only ones I can think of who will end things so clearly are anime viewers or the *hitokiri battousai*."** Hachiman is riffing off the

Akame ga Kill! anime, followed by the title of the titular character in *Rurouni Kenshin*, which is sometimes translated as "manslayer."

6 **"*Wow, I hope she didn't pull a muscle with that reach*."** The original pun here was on *tottetsuke* (forced) and *totte* (handle). "Her reason was so forced, it seemed convenient for carrying (the boxes)."

7 **"*Good grief, Irohasu*…one of those Keroyon frog statues they stand up in front of pharmacies."** The original Japanese gag here is "We were all so exasperated (*akire*), it was like Agiire Japan [referencing Javier Aguirre's time as the manager of Japan's World Cup soccer team]. Isshiki seemed nonchalant [*kerori*]. She was so nonchalant, I wanted to make her a doll like Keroyon and stand her up in front of pharmacies." *Kero* is an onomatopoeia that means "ribbit."

8 ***The Hurt Locker*** is a Hollywood movie about a bomb disposal team in the Iraq War.

9 **"About the only other thing I could do is consult a Ouija board."** In Japanese, he says *kokkuri-san*, which is basically the same thing as a Ouija board but with a slightly different history. He literally says *kokkuri-san ni guguru* (consult a *kokkuri-san*), referencing the title of the manga *Gugure! Kokkuri-san!* The title is a wordplay that's not immediately clear and is also a spoiler for the ending.

10 ***"Did someone die? Has there been a funeral service recently?"*** Traditional Buddhist service for the dead involves rituals a certain number of days after death, the most important of which in the first year is the forty-ninth day after death.

11 ***How beautiful it is to have good friends*** is the name of a famous 1951 painting of vegetables by Saneatsu Mushanokoji, artist and writer of the Taisho and Showa eras.

12 **“Miura in particular is less girlish and more like the leader of a gang of juvenile delinquents, one in Yokohama. Maybe because of her name?”** Hachiman is referencing the baseball player Daisuke Miura, who is also nicknamed Hama no Banchou (Yokohama Juvenile Gang Boss).

Chapter 4 … **Yumiko Miura** still wants to know anyway.

1 ***“Can’t I avoid asking him directly and get this done by just interviewing his guardian spirit or something?”*** The Interview with XXX’s Guardian Spirit are books about famous figures published without their authorization by the Japanese cult Happy Science.

2 **“Nobody was coming, and I was so alone, it kind of made me think a Reality Marble had activated…”** Reality Marble are the barriers characters have fights inside in the Fate series.

3 **“Well, seventeen-year-old girls are chatty melons who love to talk…”** This is referencing the Internet radio show *Kikuko Inoue charming chatty melon*, which invited anime-related guests for interviews and discussion.

4 **“I mean, this is you we’re talking about… *Is it me you’re talking about? You never call me by my name; I get so unsure…*”** In Japanese, she says *Senpai desu shi nee* (“This is you we’re talking about”), and he responds, “Senpai death *shine* [die]? I’m gonna die two times?”

5 **“*The opposite of opposition is approval? You’re not Bakabon’s dad…*”** Hachiman is referencing the gag manga *Tensai Bakabon (Genius Bakabon)* by Fujio Akatsuka. He’s always saying things like “The opposite of approval is disapproval” or “The opposite of approval! An approval of opposition!” It’s all slightly nonsensical and generally just means “Whatever, that’s fine.”

Chapter 5 … **Saika Totsuka** is waiting until that someday comes.

1 "Uh, you don't have to say it like, *C'mon and let's play baseball…*" This is a reference to the long-running newspaper comic *Sazae-san*. Sazae's younger brother Katsuo is often pestered by his best friend Nakajima to go play baseball.

2 "I shall not fail my exams to become a *rurouni*, *nin nin*." Usually someone who fails their exams and spends another year studying is called a *ronin*, but Zaimokuza takes this opportunity to make a *Rurouni Kenshin* reference (the words use the same characters: 浪人 versus 流浪人). *Nin nin* is what they say in the kids' show *Ninja Hattori-kun*. Zaimokuza is also going further in his cringe-talk than usual, using *sessha* and *de gozaru*, which are associated with ninja and samurai and used by Kenshin and characters in *Ninja Hattori-kun*. Zaimokuza usually uses *ware* and *de aru*, which sounds more like a dramatic anime villain.

3 "N-ngh… The heavy acceleration phenomenon… The Heaviness…" This is a sort of time distortion field caused by the antagonists in *Kamen Rider Drive*.

4 "I got through half of the distance of the run, rotting along by myself and warming up my hamstrings. Heke! No wait, that's Hamtaro…" The Japanese pun here is on *tattaka* and *tottoko*, both onomatopoeia for running, the latter of which is part of the Japanese title for *Hamtaro* (*Tottoko Hamutaro*). *Heke* is part of the ham-ham language in *Hamtaro*.

5 "…these three clowns—*Three for the Landfill*, if you will—…" The original pun here was *sanbaka* (three idiots) samba carnival.

6 "I was like a Rockbomb, wasting my turns doing nothing…" The Rockbomb is a recurring enemy in the Dragon Quest games. Typically, it will waste turns (*yousu wo ukagau*, "wait and see," though it's translated differently in every game) before eventually exploding in the player's face.

7 "At this rate, it's only a matter of time before we arrive at

the Love Stage…" *Love Stage!!* is the name of a BL manga with an anime adaptation.

8 **"…a heart-dancing encore began bubbling up within me…"** *Kokoro odoru ankooru wakasu* is a lyric from the song "Kokoro Odoru" by nobodyknows+.

9 ***Juumangoku manjuu*** are a type of sweets local to Saitama, and "The wind speaks to you" is part of their ad slogan.

10 **"I think if you win at that card game, then your wishes come true, and you become an unlimited girl… Wait, no, wrong English word, that's *selector*."** Selector is a series of anime works based on the WIXOSS TCG.

11 **"Self-recommendation. The so-called AO entrance, huh…? I think the official name for that was *Ability Optional*, right?"** AO here actually stands for Admissions Office, and this style of entrance exam is actually closer to the Western standard, and rather than taking the Asian-style entrance exam, you do stuff like writing an essay, you're evaluated on overall high school grades, and you might have an interview. (Also, the original Japanese pun was *aho demo OK*, "Okay even if you're an idiot.")

Chapter 6 … Gallantly, **Haruno Yukinoshita** departs into the darkness.

1 **"*Is the order a Hachibun?* But hearing the word *work* does not make my heart *hop-hop*."** This is a reference to the gag manga *Is the Order a Rabbit?*

2 **"Life is hard!! Or I think that's what they said in an ad for the anime *Jinsei*."** *Jinsei* (life) is an anime based off a light novel written by a writer friend of Watari's.

3 **"Is she a wannabe Newtype or something? That woman! Step on her ships with a Gelgoog!"** In the Gundam franchise, Newtypes are human beings with special abilities, almost like

space psychics. In Japanese, Hachiman actually says, “That woman! Stop being a *fujoshi*!” But the particular way it’s worded is referencing the *Gundam: Stardust Memory* Internet meme, “That woman! Step on her with a Gelgoog!” referring to Nina, who is basically the most loathed female character in the entire Gundam franchise, a series already infamous for loathed female characters.

4 “Invisible beings and stuff—if this were *Another*, someone’d be dead.” This line is a meme that originated with the series of mystery horror novels and their anime adaptation. The series involves a lot of gruesome deaths.

5 “Well, there’s marriage blues, there’s maternity blues, and Tail Blue.” Tail Blue is a character from the light novels *Gonna Be the Twin-Tail!!*

6 “I nodded, mentally doing a sideways peace sign and going *Capisce!*” This is the habit of the protagonist of *PriPara*. It’s a *Pretty Rhythm* sequel, originally an idol-themed rhythm game for little girls (that of course got a side audience of older male *otaku*, as you do).

7 “It’s not like Nyanta or Hamuzou or Ebizou or Kikuzou.” *Chuu* is a mouse squeak, so it’s quite reasonable Yui would assume *Chuuta* (the Japanese pronunciation of “tutor”) is a mouse. Nyanta would be a cat’s name, and Hamuzou would be a hamster. The pattern here is taking a male suffix (*ta* and *zou* are name endings for boys) and putting a pet word ahead of it (*Hamtaro* would be a popular example of this). Ebizou and Kikuzou, on the other hand, are inherited stage names for performers in traditional arts like Kabuki and *rakugo*.

8 “No problems here, no punks here, no monks here. Please dial back that real-life Monk-class aura. Bet she could fire off Multifists.” Multifists is a recurring skill for the Monk job class in Dragon Quest. The original Japanese pun here is on *monku* (complaint) and *Monk*.

9 ***"Quit with the noises. Are you T, born in a temple?"*** T, born in a temple, is a recurring character in Japanese creepypastas of the 2000s. He's a regular guy with a strong spiritual sense.

10 **"Unlike Isshiki or Komachi, her devilishness was Demon Lord levels. And as you know, you can't escape the Demon Lord."** "You can't escape the Demon Lord" is a quote from the Demon Lord Vearn in the manga *Dragon Quest: The Adventure of Dai*.

Chapter 7 … **Hayato Hayama always meets expectations.**

1 **"Is it because I'm invisibeel after all?"** The Japanese pun here was on *nuru* (slimy, slippery) and *null*.

2 **"Ickygaya…"** The nickname here in Japanese is Hikigaeru (where *kaeru* means "frog").

3 **"…As if it was the climax right from the beginning."** This is a reference to the catchphrase of the protagonist of *Kamen Rider Den-O*, Ryotaro Nogami: "From start to finish, I'm always at a climax!"

4 **"By the time I finished running, my knees were shaking like tambourines at karaoke. It was almost funny. Ha. Fun-knee."** The Japanese pun here is a play on *hiza ga warau*, which literally means "laughing/smiling knees" but as an idiom means "shaking knees." Then he says, "This is really *nikko nikko nii*…" *Nikko nikko nii* is like "smiley smiley smile" and is a cutesy thing Nico Yazawa from *Love Live!* does.

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